

A Collection of Short Stories #3

by Jonathan Olvera

Manuscript Submission

Date: May 11, 2025

Author Contact:

Jonathan Olvera

226 E South Mountain Ave #4

Phoenix, AZ 85042

Email: jonolvera776@gmail.com

Phone: 480.819.8946

This manuscript is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

32,879 Word Count

**A Collection of Short
Stories #3**
by
Jonathan Olvera

Phoenix, Arizona
© 2025 Jonathan Olvera
All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

A Collection of Short Stories #3

by Jonathan Olvera

Falling Into the Light
by Jonathan Olvera 5

Balpie and the Christmas Spiral
by Quilla Raye 10

Krypto: The Last Light of Krypton
by Jonathan Olvera 13

Journal of an Arizona Engineer
Entry: July 31st — The Brightest Day
by Jonathan Olvera 17

Tholamir: Born of the First Bolt
by Jonathan Olvera 20

The Trial of Jonathan: A Chronicle from the Court of the Broken Crown
by Abad Jerónimo de Clairveux 22

La Befana and the Scroll of Reindeer
by Jonathan Olvera 25

Karl El R. Klitz and the Monster in the Next Room
by Jonathan Olvera 28

Flash: The Wobble Before Time <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	32
Collateral Regret <i>by Kaveh Shirazi</i>	37
Collateral Regret: Part II <i>by Kaveh Shirazi</i>	43
Espionage and the Litter Box <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	46
 In the Shadow of Suns and Kings <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	52
 The Year of the Raptor <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	55
 The Platform Promise <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	57
 Crown of Heat: A Memoir of 2025 <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	61
 A Crown of Autumn: A Thanksgiving Memoir <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	63
 Ashes of the Fugitive <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	65
 The Arizona Calculator <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	68
 Saltlight and Signatures <i>by Jonathan Olvera</i>	72
 Exile and Coin	

***by Jonathan Olvera* 75**

Terminal Heat: A Dialogue of Exile

***by Jonathan Olvera* 77**

The Bus Stop Dimension

***by Jonathan Olvera* 100**

Santa Claus in the Southwest Desert

***By Jonathan Olvera* 102**

Dragon-Sitting for Dummies

***By Jonathan Olvera* 106**

Author's Preface

by Jonathan Olvera

Welcome, dear reader.

This third volume of short stories continues a journey of voices — imagined, remembered, borrowed, and transformed. These stories arrived in pieces: from dusty notebooks, overheard phrases, restless dreams, and quiet moments on long walks through Arizona's heat. Together, they form a loose constellation — each narrative a small light pointed toward some question I couldn't quite shake.

Here you'll find ancient prophecies etched into collars, engineers navigating extreme heat and inner stillness, and courtroom sagas from lands both mythical and satirical. There are moments of play, moments of prayer, and moments where the boundary between fiction and confession starts to blur. A few entries stretch the rules of storytelling. Others honor them with a nod and a wink.

I'm honored to feature contributions from fellow voices again — Quilla Raye, Abad Jerónimo de Clairveux, and Kaveh Shirazi — whose perspectives bring contrast, depth, and unexpected resonance to this volume. Their stories sharpen and soften mine, and I'm grateful for the balance.

As with previous collections, these pages are less about perfect conclusions and more about honest questions. What does loyalty look like in exile? Can redemption arrive in the shape of a dog, a spiral, or a silent regret? Is storytelling a form of rebellion — or return?

However you arrived here, thank you for turning the page.

With curiosity and gratitude,

Jonathan Olvera

Phoenix, Arizona

2025

Falling Into the Light

by Jonathan Olvera

Blam!
Spat!
Thud!!

The whole world shook as Dr. Ryan Christ, a well-known local physician, crashed into the earth. He bounced once, twice—three times—before finally landing hard on his back and side, his limbs sprawled, breath knocked from his lungs.

What had just happened was impossible to explain.

Earlier that morning, Ryan had boarded a small charter plane for a casual flight over the farmlands just outside town. An adventure, he'd told himself. Something different. He had always been curious about skydiving. His friends did it for fun. As someone who spent his days in trauma rooms and sterile corridors, Ryan longed for a rush that wasn't laced with death or suffering.

He had gone shopping for a parachute the week before, poring over options and price tags. A full rig was too expensive. So, with hesitation and budget in mind, he bought a small emergency chute—"Just in case," he told the clerk and himself.

As the plane climbed over the fields, Ryan's skydiving partner looked over, saw the pack strapped to Ryan's back, and motioned to the pilot.

"The door's open!" the man shouted over the roar of the engine. "Jump!"

Ryan hesitated. Was this the right moment? Was he ready?

Before he could respond or explain that it was only an emergency chute, he felt the pressure behind him. He was being *nudged*—maybe not violently, but firmly enough.

"Alright then!" he shouted, adrenaline spiking. "I'll jump!"

And he did.

Thoom!
Whip!

The air tore at his face and body as he plummeted. The ground below rushed up like a nightmare on fast forward. His heart pounded in his chest.

Now or never.

He pulled the cord.

Whoop! Whoosh!

The chute burst open—a miracle—but not a full one. It slowed him, but not enough to glide, not enough to drift gently to the ground. The earth still rushed toward him. He knew this would hurt.

“Arrrrghhrrhh!” Ryan screamed.
“Ahhhrghhrrhhhh! Ohhh Lord!”

Then—blackness.

Darkness. Quiet. Slivers of Light.

Somewhere far off, voices called to him.

“Dr. Ryan! We’re here! Stay with us!”

His mind floated between consciousness and something else—something not quite of this world.

In that in-between place, Ryan had a vision. Not a dream, not a hallucination—he knew the difference. This was too vivid. Too *real*.

He saw figures standing around him, glowing faintly with light. Hands reached out—kind, calming. He felt their touch not only on his body but on his soul. Warmth coursed through his chest. He saw young men and women who had witnessed his fall. Some knelt and prayed. Others called for help. Their compassion reached across time and space and carried him to safety.

In this state, he saw angels. Not with wings and trumpets, but as radiant beings that hummed with peace. Their presence filled him with an overwhelming sense of purpose and clarity.

And then... the hospital.

He opened his eyes slowly to the sterile white ceiling of St. Mary’s Medical Center.

Machines beeped softly.

He was alive.

He, Dr. Ryan Christ, the one who saved lives, was now the one being saved.

The Days That Followed

His body healed, but something inside him had changed forever.

The fall had shattered not only his bones but also his certainty. He had spent his life as a skeptic, confident in science, dismissive of anything that could not be measured. But now? Now he had seen too much.

Then the messages began.

The first was simple. After a shower one morning, Ryan stepped to the mirror, wiped the steam with his towel, and froze.

Etched in the fog, as if written by an invisible finger, were the words:

“You were never alone.”

Chills raced through him. He searched the apartment. No one else was there.

Two days later, another message arrived. This time, whispered in a dream:

“Look for Evelyn.”

When Ryan returned to the hospital, a new patient chart landed on his desk—**Evelyn Monroe**, age 67. She was scheduled for a minor cardiac procedure, but something about her file didn’t sit right. Guided by intuition—something he would’ve scoffed at before—he ordered further tests.

They found a clot. Had it gone undetected, it would have killed her within hours.

She survived.

Evelyn wept, hugging Ryan tightly. “You saved me,” she whispered.

Ryan could only smile faintly. “Not just me.”

A Purpose Beyond Science

Every week, new messages came—on mirrors, in dreams, even in the static of his bedside radio. Some gave names. Others gave images: a child in red shoes, a man crying in a stairwell, a clock stuck at 3:14.

Each time he followed the signs, lives were changed. People were healed. Families reunited. Suicides prevented. Some called it coincidence.

Ryan knew better.

He was being led. By whom, he still wasn't sure. But he called them *the Light*.

And then... one final message arrived.

"June 30. Riverside Bridge. 3:14 PM. You must act."

It was June 29.

The River

Ryan drove to the Riverside Bridge early the next morning. The river flowed calmly beneath, and workers buzzed around the old steel bridge, reinforcing supports. To any passerby, it looked routine.

But something gnawed at him.

He approached a foreman. "Is everything safe?"

"Yeah," the man said. "We're finishing tomorrow. Everything's solid."

But Ryan saw the crane—a massive one—lifting beams above a narrow pedestrian path. A food truck was parked nearby. Families walked along the bank. A girl in a yellow dress chased dragonflies.

He stayed.

And at exactly 3:14 PM, the crane groaned. The wind shifted. A strap snapped.

The beam plummeted.

"MOVE!" Ryan shouted, sprinting into the chaos.

People screamed. Workers ducked. The girl and her mother barely escaped.

The beam slammed into the walkway where they had been standing just seconds before.

No one was hurt.

Not one soul.

After the Miracle

News crews arrived. “Local doctor warns of accident—prevents tragedy.”

Ryan declined interviews. He didn’t need fame.

That night, alone in his apartment, he sat in silence.

The mirror fogged as steam from his shower rose.

He watched carefully.

Words formed again.

“You listened. You chose light. Keep going.”

And he smiled.

He still didn’t know *why* he had been chosen.

But he knew this:

He would keep listening. Keep healing. Keep believing.

Because miracles were real.

And sometimes... they began with a fall.

Balpie and the Christmas Spiral

by Quilla Raye

I was a young pen, like many others in the Flats. My name was Balpie. I had a smooth black body, a polished sheen, and within me pulsed ink with a hint of mischief and mystery. The Flats stretched endlessly—a white, blank world where everything was written and forgotten. But this December, something magical stirred across the canvas.

Snow didn't fall in the Flats. It never had. But the rays—those strange colored streaks from the Other Universe—began to glow a little cooler, softer. They shimmered like frost across the edge of the X, that great crossing etched into the ground from generations past. It was then that I heard the word whispered by my mother, Slud Ramlud, her gel ink glistening: "Christmas."

"What's Christmas?" I asked, spinning slightly on my ballpoint.

She smiled and drew a wreath in the air. "A season from the Other Place. It's about joy, warmth, and a man named Saint Nicholas. He brings gifts to the faithful with reindeer that fly—especially one named Rudolph."

My father, Ramlud Rowes, wasn't as amused. "Let him study his calligraphy. That nonsense won't help him on the Grid."

But I was curious. So curious, in fact, that I enrolled in the Seasonal School of Marks and Symbols, where we learned to draw holly, stars, and curves of cheer. We molded ink into ornaments—spheres, bells, and sparkles—that hovered for a moment before flattening back into the page.

The teacher, Miss Scripta, a majestic fountain pen with a golden nib, announced, "For our final lesson, you'll each craft a Christmas ornament and hang it near the X. If your spirit shines bright enough, the rays will remember you."

I got to work, swirling my ink in tight coils and broad arcs. I drew a spiral tree with a comet on top and small boxes beneath—my version of hope. I named it *The Christmas Spiral*.

When I returned home that evening, the Flats had cooled. The X was glowing faintly red and green, like embers pulsing beneath the page. I placed my ornament sketch on the canvas beside the old glyphs and waited.

Night came. I curled beside my mother, who sang carols passed down from generations before her. Outside, the rays flickered.

Then—I heard it.

A sound like bells. A faint chime that cut through the silence of the Flats. I sat up and stared at the sky. Something was moving—swift and bold, a shape against the void.

Reindeer. Not drawn, but formed. Volumes with color, motion, and a sleigh at the helm. And leading them, his nose glowing ruby red, was Rudolph.

Behind him sat Saint Nicholas—round, jolly, formed of flowing ink and pure intention. As he passed over the Flats, small gifts dropped—swirls of color, tiny sparks, tokens of joy.

One landed near me.

A scroll. Blank. Waiting.

I picked it up and heard his voice whisper across the Flats:

“Draw not what you know, but what you hope for.”

I stared at the white expanse.

Then I drew: my family around a glowing orb. Friends dancing in color. The Flats bursting into song.

And in that moment, the canvas rippled. The spiral tree rose—just slightly—and shimmered.

That night, Saint Nicholas had found the Flats. And the Flats, once silent, began to hum with the spirit of Christmas.

Balpie, the boy with ink and dreams, was never the same again.

That night, before drifting off to sleep, I wrote a poem with my softest ink. I folded it gently and placed it beside the ornament I had made. The sky above twinkled with hints of the Other Place. And I whispered to myself the final lines of the poem:

A Poem for Saint Nicholas

by Balpie

On the Flats so wide and white,
I dream of stars and reindeer flight.

A spiral tree, a gift, a song—
A wish to where the kind belong.

With ink and hope, I make my mark,
A light in canvas cold and stark.
So if you pass my corner slow,
Dear Santa, let your sleigh-bells show.

I've drawn with wonder, tried to be
A heart of warmth and honesty.
Let Rudolph guide you to my door,
And may the Flats be blank no more.

Then I curled up beside my family, the glow of the ornament dancing against our wall. The rays stretched above, soft and patient. And in the quiet, I fell asleep—
smiling, believing, and waiting for Christmas.

Krypto: The Last Light of Krypton

By Jonathan Olvera

The white Labrador Retriever sat quietly inside the pet store, his nose twitching slightly as the smell of dog food, rubber toys, and disinfectant swirled together. He had been there a few days now, a recent addition in a city always buzzing with movement. Metropolis didn't slow down for puppies — not even for one as calm, watchful, and strangely aware as he was. He waited for his turn at the water bowl, as the other puppies jostled around. After mealtime, the store made them each take turns using a training pad. It wasn't glamorous, but he obeyed the system.

Outside, life moved fast. Down the street at the Daily Planet, Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter with a secret legacy written in stardust and prophecy, sat at his desk flipping through photographs for a feature on urban redevelopment. As he stared, something else caught his attention — a large truck pulling up in front of the nearby pet store, unloading nearly a hundred puppies.

Clark stood up from his desk, half-intrigued, half-distracted. He could see them even from his office — a massive variety of dogs in crates, barking and wagging tails. The delivery looked out of place, almost surreal. There were Labradors, retrievers, collies, terriers — every shape and size.

Lois Lane chuckled as she passed his desk, noticing him lost in thought. "You going to buy one of those dogs, Smallville? Jimmy says he's getting a pug."

Clark smiled shyly. "Maybe. Would be good to have some company. Someone quiet."

But in truth, there was more gnawing at him.

For years, Clark had dreamt of another world — one with oceans that moved like molten silver, where crystal monoliths stretched toward an emerald sky. In that place, language wasn't spoken but carved into light and stone, and knowledge passed through vibration. It was a dream, yes. But also a memory. A vision. And it had never quite left him.

In these dreams, he was called by another name: Kal-El.

A name whispered in the winds of a dying world.

In his visions, massive beings of light and knowledge — the Guardians — prepared for a distant moment when the prophecy of Krypton would awaken in a far-off star system. They were not bound by time the way Earthlings were. They watched, they waited. And above all, they believed. Kal-El, they had said, would rise. Not as a god, but as a servant of peace. A man of dual heritage — Earth and Krypton.

And he would not rise alone.

Clark snapped out of his reverie and stared again at the pet store across the street. Something nudged at him. A vibration, a flicker. Something beyond instinct. He made up his mind — it was his break anyway.

He told Perry White he'd be gone for twenty minutes. As he stepped into the elevator, the steel doors reflected a bright streak of sunlight across the glass panels. He watched the city fall below him, a tapestry of movement and chaos.

But all he could think of was the dream.

And the feeling that something was about to change.

The bell above the pet store door jingled as Clark entered.

"Woof!" "Yip!" "Yap yap!" "Yelp!"

Dozens of pups cried out for attention, bouncing and rolling over each other in a display of chaotic joy. But amidst the whirlwind of energy, there was one — sitting perfectly still. A white Labrador Retriever, eyes calm, body coiled with presence.

The dog didn't bark. He didn't need to.

He just looked straight into Clark's eyes.

Clark blinked. He felt... something. Familiar. Echoing. Not in the mind — in the marrow. In the frequency of memory. The dog tilted his head slightly, almost like a nod.

Clark didn't hesitate.

"I want that one," he said to the store attendant. "The white Lab. Hold him for me — I'll be back after work."

As he left the store — and walked past the metal trash bins, the bakery, the flower vendor — he didn't see it: hovering just beyond human sight, a silver saucer shaped like a turning crystal orb shimmered above a rooftop. Inside it, the Observer recorded data. This was the one. Kal-El had chosen.

[Classified Guardian Log Entry — Observer Unit #7]
Subject: Proto-Companion Activation Sequence Initiated
Resonance: Confirmed with Kal-El's biometrics
Chrono-Signal Alignment: +19.8 hours post-contact
Gene Key: Reactivation Scheduled

The white Labrador was no ordinary dog.

His name would be Krypto.

But that name had not been given at birth.

That name was written into the origin code of a species long extinguished — the last surviving companion of the House of El. Genetically designed. Spiritually enhanced. Stored in a dormant state until the resonance of Kal-El's proximity would awaken his purpose.

Krypto was bred not only with strength — but wisdom, instinct, and memory that transcended time. His body was created using solar-bonded molecular fibers, structured around Kryptonian genetics, laced with Earth-digestible DNA. He would be loyal — yes. But more than that: he would become an extension of Kal-El's protection on Earth.

Back at the Daily Planet, Clark's stomach rumbled. He hadn't eaten, but Jimmy Olsen tossed him half a sandwich. "You forget again?" Jimmy asked.

"Got a little sidetracked."

Lois was typing furiously, barely looking up. "You bought the dog, didn't you?"

"Not yet," Clark answered. "But I will."

That night, after deadlines were met, he returned.

The dog had waited — patient, poised, eyes glowing faintly in the dim store light.

As Clark carried the small white dog through the city's nighttime glow, he felt... calmer. The traffic didn't irritate him. The usual paranoia of a world needing saving — momentarily, at least — faded.

That night, at home, he set up a small bed, gave the dog water and food, and finally rested.

And in his dream, the stars aligned. The Great Crystal split open, and the light of Krypton shot into the Earth's stratosphere like a beacon. A voice spoke in the lost tongue:

"Your guardian awakens, Kal-El. Your companion has arrived. The last of the sacred blood, etched into fur and spirit. He will stand when you fall. He will speak when you cannot. He is the last light of our memory."

Clark jolted awake.

The dog sat on the floor beside the bed, tail gently wagging.

"Krypto," Clark whispered.

The name rang true — like a bell struck deep inside a cavern.

The dog lifted his head and barked once, soft but clear.

Outside the apartment, the saucer had vanished — its work done. The Guardian returned to its realm, knowing the wheels of fate had turned once again.

In the weeks that followed, Clark noticed things.

Krypto learned commands without training.

He sensed danger blocks before it happened.

He stared at the sky when Clark thought about flying.

And sometimes, when they were alone in the fields outside Metropolis, Clark would test his own powers — lifting steel, soaring into the stratosphere — and the dog would leap after him, bounding effortlessly over fences, his speed near-blinding.

One afternoon, Krypto stood in front of an oncoming truck to save a child. The vehicle crumpled like paper around him. The child was unharmed. The dog walked away.

The headlines read: “Miracle Dog Saves Metropolis Child.”

Clark knew better.

He knew Krypto was not just a miracle — he was a message.

And in the deepest vaults of memory, buried beneath decades of terrestrial life, Kal-El finally understood:

Krypto was his last link to home.

A companion sent by his ancestors.

A guardian of the prophecy.

A protector of Earth — just like him.

Not all heroes wear capes. Some wear fur. And others... carry the weight of worlds in silence.

Journal of an Arizona Engineer
Entry: July 31st — The Brightest Day

By Jonathan Olvera

The sun rose with a vengeance today, casting its full weight on the copper-colored land. This is the peak of the summer solstice—a season where every moment stretches long and heavy, like steel under tension. Here in Arizona, this time of year means long days under blistering heat, where time becomes a slow burn, and every thought feels carved into dry earth.

As usual, I found myself busy, occupied nearly every hour with a list of tasks that only grows longer the more I complete it. Plumbing repairs, data calibration, electronic monitoring, land surveying, logging field notes, and sometimes just improvising with whatever scrap I had at hand—this is my work. This is my rhythm. The land gives no rest, and neither do the machines.

I keep track of everything. That's part of who I am. I catalog every reading, photograph every angle, and measure every shift. Technology is not just a tool for me—it's a companion, a record of our time, a mirror to human endeavor. My databases have become a kind of scripture. They're filled with symbols, voltage trails, water pressure reports, and coded anomalies. Some engineers fish for faults in wires. I listen to the dirt.

And the dirt speaks—oh, how it speaks.

The land I work on is an odd kind of cemetery, a resting place for centuries of motion and empire. There are Roman bricks buried next to quartzite from Chile. Basalt from Sonora, sand from the East, iron dust from abandoned railways. This isn't just a job site—it's a memory bank of the Earth. I often wonder if this is where the last breath of old Rome was buried, where new cities might rise again. But that's just the poet in me. Mostly, I'm just trying to keep the circuits running.

There is little instruction for what I do. It's difficult to direct this work with precision because it blends science, improvisation, and long, hot hours of solitude. I spend my days defining dimensions—of terrain, energy flow, and even memory. I

meditate on the movement of the Earth and the subtle shifts that betray hidden resources: moisture content, mineral density, magnetic behavior. The planet moves, and I try to follow.

To monitor energy is to understand power—not just electrical, but spiritual, cultural, and geopolitical. It's vital to know how resources behave: where they accumulate, when they resist, what they whisper under pressure. I observe. I write. I draw my conclusions.

Leadership, I've learned, isn't about charisma or loud declarations. It's about being prepared—quietly, steadily. Knowledge. Practice. Timing. Precision. These are the things that matter when it comes down to the moment of choice.

We've all been there—on the edge of a decision that defines the future of a group, a project, a people. The hardest ones are not emotional, they are logistical: How much water can be spared? Where do we send the laborers? How do we balance the needs of livestock and electronics? These aren't just technical choices—they are deeply human.

Control is not about dominance. It's about measure: how much is needed, how much is too much, how to sustain without harm. The application of that control—our methods—has troubled me more than once.

People like to think in terms of progress or collapse. But there's another option: maintenance. Quiet, persistent care. Not glory—just stewardship. I find value in this. Whether it's fixing a broken pipe or mapping an underground aquifer, this labor is sacred.

Still, it becomes complicated. Always. With land come priorities. Cattle, grading, soil density, housing placement, data infrastructure. Every move affects another. Resources need logic, and logic needs vision. But even vision must bow to reality.

Sometimes, I wonder—what is this whole system for? Who benefits from these calculations and these surveys? Are we building a new civilization or preserving the shell of an old one?

There's a strange force at work when you study labor in the modern context. We see productivity charts, workforce flows, population demands. But behind all that is a question of ethics: Are we creating opportunity—or are we engineering servitude?

Is this a punishment? Or a trial? Or is it simply a game—one big social experiment?

I don't know the answer.

What I do know is that there is no real need for all these overcomplicated Celtic mechanics, though they exist. There is no real need for such dazzling feats of engineering—yet they're here, built, installed, and maintained by tired hands and overtaxed minds.

Are they necessary? Or are they a symbol of excess?

Society includes them without question, as if advancement is always a virtue. But I've come to believe that not all progress is beneficial. Some things should be questioned. Some designs rejected. Not every invention is an improvement.

We've made it hard to monitor the crimes of this system—the failures of judgment that aren't listed on a criminal record. Murder, theft, exploitation—they remain, only dressed in suits and clean ledgers.

At times, I think we're living in a biblical allegory. A modern Babel—confused speech, fractured values, scattered people. The tower we build today isn't a monument—it's a supply chain, a ledger of profits, a network of behavior patterns and AI-simulated models.

Where does evil begin? Not in action, but in omission—in the choice to ignore consequences.

And so, we display value through labor, through product, through measured output. But we forget the method. We forget that the laborer is a person. That value cannot always be quantified. That the process matters more than the end result.

It becomes harder each year to be accepted as a leader. People resent rules. They chafe at boundaries. But to govern well is to define the shape of life—not to control it, but to give it structure.

Labor rules. Regional policy. Ownership rights. These are no longer just legal documents—they are spiritual covenants. They define whether a person may work or not. May survive or not.

I begin to see men not just as beings, but as records of time—born from soil, stress, temperature, and the celestial shifts. Fossils in the making.

What, then, is the point of our bickering? Of tribalism, of conflict, of petty agendas?

Surely there must be a time to settle all debts—to wipe the ledger and begin again, with clearer terms.

I will never waste my time in arguments. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not for ego. Not for power. I don't participate in that kind of noise.

I know how this ends. It ends when it must. I believe in resolution. I believe in equality—not in illusion, but in structure.

It's medicine, in a sense. Difficult, painful, but healing. Even when things become insane—livestock loose, data corrupted, arguments flying like dust—there is always a root cause. There is always a correction.

Some men must fall for the system to reset.

That's the cold part of it. The part I don't share in polite company.

But here, in my journal, I record it. Some sacrifices are silent, but necessary. Just like the water pump you never see. Just like the foundation beneath the structure. Just like the engineer beneath the empire.

And so I remain, at my post—at home.

This is my calling. I'm not a fool. I'm not ashamed. I am a successful person—not by wealth, not by recognition—but by results. I move things forward. I will fix it. I build. I chart paths.

I make things better—even when the world insists on burning.

Tholamir: Born of the First Bolt

By Jonathan Olvera

In the earliest records, etched deep in the burning annals of eternity, there is a tale whispered between dimensions—a story of a demi-human. His name was **Tholamir**.

Before history, before time was carved into seconds and stars were given names, there was only the *Infinite Passage*—a realm of ceaseless energy, burning sodium tides, and roaring gasses spinning without form or fate.

Tholamir was not born in the way mortals are born. He was *shaped*, forged by will and resistance, by a power higher than even the cosmic furnace that tried to swallow him.

It began with **collision**.

Energy and heat.

Mass and time.

Everything crashed, twisted, and warped in a theater of sparks and unbearable intensity—heats no creature of modern time could ever comprehend.

Trillions upon trillions of seething sodium bodies morphed endlessly.

—**Spark!**

—**Change!**

A notch cracked open in the fabric of reality itself.

It should not have happened. Yet it did.

Within the chaos, there was an anomaly—*exhaustion*. Reality flipped, like a divine table overturned by something ancient and purposeful. From this anomaly, a massive **bolt of energy** struck the endless Pool of Becoming. It zigzagged violently—above and below—carving patterns where there had only been repetition.

This world—this *Pool*—could not fall. It *floated*, suspended by the laws it had not yet defined. Within it surged choice, will, and resistance—qualities foreign to an infinite realm of burning sameness.

Suddenly, the pool cooled.

Where once there was only fire, now came opposition: *cold*.

Then—

—**Zap!**

A crack of lightning lit the Pool's crystalline surface. Something formed on a radiant board of sodium—a **titan**.

He was the result not of evolution, but of collision, defiance, and divine design. A vessel of potential given shape in the boiling ether.

And his name... was Tholamir.

Across the firmament, three ancient witnesses stirred: **Caol, Lein, and Doner**—entities older than shape or shadow. They watched from afar as the sodium blaze flickered and transformed.

Orbs ignited like thoughts in the mind of a god. One was set ablaze and turned to ash. Another glowed fiercely, burning like fire itself. Yet another became the ember of a world, holding heat but refusing to consume.

From this fire, *passage* opened—an eternal scar in time, streaked with flame and possibility. And through it spun a single orb that did not extinguish. It spun, and with its spinning, it declared: *existence*.

From that declaration, a **shadow** was born—a force of opposition that followed the orb like a silent vow, ever pursuing it, never catching it. Heat and dark. Light and cold. Action and reaction.

In this theater of spin and spark, the sodium board twisted. Its matter pulled and tore, reshaped by gravitational rhythms and radiant command. Little pieces—cool fragments, burning filaments—came together.

And then:

Form.

Two long extensions for arms.

Two for legs.

A nucleus for a head.

The shape of Tholamir—mythic and ancient—began to dance. Not randomly, but in *ellipse*—spinning with the hot orb, yet always tilting toward the one orb that was most cool.

There, on a world unborn and untouched by time, Tholamir became **whole**.

He stood not as a god, nor as a man, but as the first **choice**.

A being of opposition and balance.

A sentinel carved from lightning, born in the crack between heat and void.

And as he took his first step on this spinning marble—one world among many—he did so not to rule, but to **guard**.

For he was the child of the bolt, the echo of resistance, and the answer to a question that only eternity could ask.

He was **Tholamir**, the demi-human.

The **First Spark** of sentient will.

The Trial of Jonathan: A Chronicle from the Court of the Broken Crown

by Abad Jerónimo de Clairveux

In the year of our Lord 1452, when frost clung to the hem of spring and the banners of Castile drooped beneath clouded skies, there arrived at the gates of Château Bellevictoire a young man with little more than a letter, a prayer, and a name—Jonathan.

He was not of noble birth, nor had he slain beasts or won battles. But there was something in his bearing—neither boastful nor broken—that unsettled the court. He had come in answer to a peculiar decree that King Alphonse III had made:

"Let any soul, noble or common, who believes himself worthy of serving the crown—either as squire or sovereign in proxy—step forward, and let the people and providence decide."

Many laughed. Some nobles scoffed. But Jonathan walked barefoot from the Pyrenees and brought with him no sword but a scroll bearing the seal of a forgotten monastery: *Clairveux*.

As chronicler of those events, and once humble abbot of Clairveux myself, I, Jerónimo, now in twilight and ink-stained solitude, record the truth of what occurred—not for favor, nor fame, but because the tale still echoes in our valleys and veins.

Jonathan was offered quarters among the lowborn squires. At table, he spoke little. When asked if he were mad to pursue the role of *king's substitute*, he answered, "I seek not a throne, but a trial."

But politics—oh, politics!—had their own hungers. The Duke of Valencay whispered that the boy was a puppet of rebels. Lady Solène of Béarn suspected he was an agent of France. The bishop declared him "too quiet to be trustworthy." And worst of all, Prince Fernand, the king's own cousin, mocked him openly, calling him "Jonathan the Jester without bells."

The court, ever hungry for sport, decided Jonathan must pass three tests to prove his worth. The people, priests, and peers would each assign him one.

The king, amused, allowed it—though I saw a flicker in Alphonse's eyes that night. Hope, or fear, I could not tell.

The people's test was announced first. A peasant woman named Ysabel approached the court. Her son had been jailed for stealing bread from the royal bakery—his fourth offense. According to the law, he would lose his hand by morning. "Let the would-be king judge my son," she cried. "Let him choose: justice, or mercy."

Jonathan sat in the square beside the baker's stall, surrounded by murmurs. He listened not just to the mother but to the boy, who admitted his theft with no remorse but spoke of a sick sister and no work in winter. Jonathan then addressed the crowd.

"Justice without bread is still hunger," he said. "And mercy without law is still chaos. But where law forgets the living, and mercy forgets the law, we lose both crown and soul."

He ordered the boy to serve the bakery for a full year unpaid, feeding the poor with half the day's wares. The baker would be compensated by the royal kitchen. The crowd erupted in applause. Some nobles called it a clever trick. Others, a sign of peasant favor.

Next came the Church's trial. The bishop, red-faced and already bitter, declared that Jonathan would be sent to retrieve a relic from the ruined abbey of San Hieronimo, long sealed due to plague and superstition. "If you wish to stand by the king," the bishop growled, "prove you stand beside the saints."

Jonathan left at dawn, alone. By dusk, he returned with a cracked wooden cross and a parchment fragment. "I found these in the apse," he said simply. "And the bones of six monks. I prayed there until the sun moved." When the bishop examined the parchment, his face paled. It was a portion of a long-lost homily—one he had once claimed to possess, but never did.

The nobility grumbled. "Either he is favored by God, or a sorcerer," muttered one. The bishop said nothing. But I, Jerónimo, saw in Jonathan's eyes neither magic nor mischief, only the mark of a man willing to walk among ghosts without flinching.

The final test was offered by the Court. Prince Fernand, ever jealous, devised a political snare. "Let Jonathan choose between two petitions," he declared. "One from the miners of Andújar, who seek freedom from the salt tax. The other from the lords of León, who demand more soldiers to suppress unrest."

The court buzzed with tension. If Jonathan favored the miners, he would anger the nobles. If he favored León, the people would despise him. A trap, clear as crystal.

Jonathan requested one hour alone. He walked the gardens in silence. I watched from the chapel steps. Then he returned and stood before the court.

"I cannot grant either request in full," he said. "For a kingdom held together by taxes and terror is not a kingdom—it is a cage. Let us instead open the salt mines for one week without tax, on the feast of Saint Reina. Let the poor store up salt, and let the rich remember their feast came from their labor. And let León train five squires from Andújar, not for war, but for peacekeeping, so both lords and miners learn each other's tongue."

There was silence. Then an old general muttered, "That is a king's answer, not a squire's."

Fernand turned red with fury, but the king stood.

"Enough," said Alphonse. "I have heard my people, my priest, and my peers. And I have heard this Jonathan."

The king approached the boy, now standing with sweat upon his brow.

"You came to serve," said Alphonse. "So serve me still—but not with crown or throne. Serve me as conscience. Let no decree leave this court until it passes your thought. You shall be neither squire nor sovereign, but my *Sombra del Trono*—Shadow of the Throne."

Some nobles left that day. Others stayed, watching Jonathan with narrow eyes. But I remained. For I had seen something in that boy that the Church forgot and the Crown feared.

Now, years later, the castle is dust, and the names of Fernand, Solène, and Valencay barely stain our records. But Jonathan—ah, Jonathan walks still in songs and laws, in memory and myth. And if you pass through the mountain valleys of old Clairveux and listen at twilight, you may yet hear children playing at kingship, crying:

"Let me be the Shadow! Let me be Jonathan!"

So I write, and so I remember.

—Abad Jerónimo de Clairveux

La Befana and the Scroll of Reindeer

by Jonathan Olvera

It was a December night following a harsh summer year—one where the earth and sun had drifted apart like old friends no longer speaking. The grass had browned early, the flowers had hidden in their roots, and even the birds flew with less song. Now, the skies cooled with a shimmer of frost and the trees whispered with sleep. It was winter's rightful return, and deep in a mossy wood, in a crooked cabin shaped by wind and time, lived La Befana—the Christmas witch.

La Befana was not always up to mischief, contrary to what old tales say. In truth, she was a steward of old magic and keeper of seasonal secrets. Tonight, she felt the pull of a duty long buried in time. Her bones ached with memory, and the cottage creaked as though it remembered too.

She lit a pine-sap candle, shuffled to her library of scrolls and spices, and summoned a particular container from the highest shelf. It hovered in the air—an ancient glass scroll case dusted with golden pollen and sun-crystals, sealed by

forgotten flower magic and time. She brushed her fingers along its curved edge, and with a soft hum, the glass shimmered and opened.

Inside was a scroll of glowing parchment, alive with green ink, etched with glyphs of evergreen and dancing lights. As she unrolled it, reindeer names emerged, one by one: **Dasher**, **Dancer**, **Prancer**, **Vixen**, **Comet**, **Donner**, **Blitzen**, and—at the end, glowing ruby red—**Rudolph**.

La Befana spoke each name softly, and with each utterance, a burst of light filled the cottage.

“Dasher,” she said.

Poof! A blur of energy and hoofprints. A reindeer with a bold chest and two hooves raised, landed beside her, snorting steam.

“Dancer,” she called.

A graceful reindeer spun in midair before settling beside Dasher, his steps like music.

“Prancer,” she smiled.

A long-antlered deer with flowing reins appeared, stamping his hooves in excitement, ready to take charge of a sleigh that wasn't yet built.

“Vixen!” she declared.

Poof! A brown, fluff-coated reindeer blinked with wide, delighted eyes. Her ears perked at the candlelight, and she giggled. Yes, giggled.

Then came **Comet**—with a **thunderclap**. He jolted through the cottage, burst open the front door, and sent the scroll fluttering. Behind him, more hoofsteps echoed in the misty night.

Donner appeared square-faced and masked with dappled spots, noble and strong. His eyes, like pieces of sky stone, searched for meaning. He was always the thinker.

Then came **Blitzen**, older, bearded, and powerful. He had the look of someone who'd been called from a very long nap.

Finally—**Rudolph**. His nose glowed gently, a ruby light that warmed the shadowed corners of the room. His ears twitched in awareness, and his gaze met La Befana's.

“Yes, yes,” she whispered, **“you're all here.”**

She stepped outside into the chill air, the door creaking behind her. The reindeer followed, kicking at the soft winter grass and sniffing the wild herbs. The reins they had worn in their past life—long tangled in the bottle—still clung to their backs.

La Befana, careful and patient, undid the knots. The magical leather whispered as she unwrapped it, her old fingers working with grace. These creatures hadn't seen the sky in many winters. They had been tucked away in stardust and pollen, waiting.

"Saint Nicholas is far away," she told them. "Busy with mushroom harvests and cocoa powder, gathering seeds for the bread and warmth we'll need." She looked to the horizon where a pink moon rose like a coin.

The reindeer pranced in the moonlight, joyful and strong. It filled her heart.

This was her duty—not the broomstick tales or frightful visits. No, she was the steward of the in-between. The one who ensured the reindeer were ready before the world even thought of sleigh bells.

She gathered herbs and powders from the forest floor, wild peppermint, star moss, and frost-thistle. Then, with a bit of moon oil and ink, she prepared a new scroll—a record to return to the world when needed.

She wrote their names again:

**In Dasher. In Dancer. In Prancer. In Vixen.
In Comet. In Donner. In Blitzen. Come now, Rudolph!**

With a swish of her cloak and a whisper to the wind, the reindeer, one by one, returned into the shimmering scroll. Hooves kicked, then paused. Each one turned to look at her before gently vanishing into the pollen-lit parchment.

When Rudolph went in last, his red glow blinked once like a candle being snuffed. Then: silence.

La Befana wound the scroll and returned it to the glass. She tied a ribbon around its neck with a tag that read:

"To Santa Claus. When the time is right."

The forest sighed as if the world had just exhaled. Lights in the trees blinked like tiny stars. The scroll glowed blue and green, a red diamond pulsing at its center like a beating heart.

La Befana returned to her cabin, her work complete. Tomorrow, she would bake honey bread and leave warm apples for the squirrels. But tonight, she sat in her rocking chair, a wool blanket over her knees, and a cup of pine tea in her hand.

Outside, frost settled gently on the leaves. The world, once again, had hope.

KARL EL R. KLITZ AND THE MONSTER IN THE NEXT ROOM

By Jonathan Olvera

"I'm going to begin controlled observations," said Dr. Karl El R. Klitz, adjusting the lenses on his cracked goggles with greasy fingers. The lab stank of ammonia and warm glass. A rusted fan whirled in the corner, half-heartedly pushing the air around.

"This egg looks like an excellent place to start!" he declared, holding the ovoid shell up to the light. Its leathery surface shimmered faintly, marbled with veins that pulsed faintly like something breathing inside.

"They are African," he muttered, setting the egg into a steel cradle. "It's not rare to find them floating—far."

The assistant, trembling in a yellow lab coat two sizes too big, adjusted his surgical mask. "Uh, Doctor Klitz, what are we actually going to do here?"

"If you'd like to make yourself useful," Klitz snapped, "you can begin to assemble the microscope. I need to go through a list to put together a recipe."

"A recipe?"

"We're going to build a worker! We're going to build a beast! An intelligent monster!" His grin stretched unnaturally across his pale face. "It is what we are here to do!"

"But—this is a crocodile egg," the assistant whispered, eyeing the nearby room through a hazy observation window. Inside, a massive shape stirred.

"I am a doctor," Klitz said, straightening his posture. "This research—it's my specialty. Inside this egg is a sequence. A rather small unit inside the shell. But with manipulation, we can change that."

"I want to make it learn to speak. I want it to walk on two feet. I want it to operate instruments, pilot drones, inject logic into biological savagery. That is not insane. Insane is not getting any work done!"

The assistant swallowed hard. "Okay, Doctor."

"I need you to be alert. Pay attention! I must work on this egg—there is also the full specimen in the next room. I need to make specific advances on it." He pointed. "Yes, that is the one."

The one in the next room.

The crocodile lay still under sedation—barely. Its eyes were wide open, golden slits blinking once every minute like clockwork. Even restrained, it was coiled with potential. The monster knew.

It knew it was being watched. Prodded. Changed.

The creature had been exposed to radioactive isotopes, then flooded with synthetic growth hormones, custom-mixed steroids, and strands of DNA from extinct reptiles and modern primates.

They injected it with knowledge—English, Mandarin, Portuguese. Mathematical logic. Social cues.

At first, it only twitched. Then it growled. Months later, in the isolation tank, it began whispering.

"I am cold."

"I'm... cold."

Klitz was thrilled. The assistant was horrified.

Eventually, they gave the creature a lab coat.

"I am... Doctor," it said, mimicking Klitz.

And for a time, it worked.

But the world changed. Outside, civilization fractured. War broke out. Cities burned. Funding evaporated. The lab was abandoned, lights left flickering. Karl El R. Klitz vanished.

And the crocodile—forgotten.

It remained in the water tank, fed by a timer system, in and out of sedation, watching years blur past in yellow haze.

But he remembered.

When the locks disengaged and the walls collapsed, he escaped.

The beast was loose in Metropolis. A hulking saurian horror cloaked in rags, its claws tapping against concrete as it crept through alleyways.

It snarled in broken English.

"I have been stuck in that laboratory... for so long!"

Now it walked upright. Taller than a man. Smarter than a wolf. Fueled by hunger and ancient rage.

MUTANT. CROCODILE. BLOODTHIRSTY LIZARD SAUR.

"I need to eat humans!" it roared, fangs glistening. "I've been stuck for so long in that sewer!"

Newspapers called it a bio-experiment gone wrong. People screamed. Fled. Died.

"It is time now!" the creature bellowed. "The son of Krypton!"

He had seen the images—of Superman. The protector. The alien. The invincible.

"I will devour you!"

On a rooftop overlooking Metropolis General, the beast waited.

"I will tear your flesh apart!"

"You are weak, human!"

The night crackled with thunder. Rain began to fall.

Somewhere in a bunker, a figure in shadow watched the chaos unfold on screen. Brainiac. Encased in cybernetic enhancements, the doctor of minds and matter. His red eyes blinked slowly.

"He's ready," Brainiac whispered. "Activate Protocol Zeta. Bring in the assistant."

Behind him, the assistant—older now, eyes sunken—stepped forward.

"We created this, Doctor. We fed it too much."

Brainiac turned. "No. Klitz created it. I simply perfected it."

"But it speaks! It learns!"

"Then it is alive. Then it is useful."

Out in the city, the Lizard Saur stomped through sewer grates. Sirens echoed. He screamed to the heavens:

"Superman! I know who you are! I know everything about you!"

"Do not look at me!"

"I need blood!"

He seized a statue, crushing it in his hands.

"I'm getting a vision!"

"Destroy Superman!"

From the clouds, the sound of sonic boom. A blur of red.

He grinned.

"Yes... come here Superman!"

The monster pointed. "I can taste your memories!"

Superman hovered above the street, a red cape trailing like fire. His eyes narrowed.

"What are you?" he asked.

The crocodile laughed. "I was born in a lab. Forged in a vat. Now—I will devour everything!"

A car flipped. Glass shattered. The first punch cracked concrete.

The battle had begun.

FLASH: The Wobble Before Time

by Jonathan Olvera

Barry Allen was only eleven years old when the land beneath his feet—just a patch of dirt in the wide American plains—began to change. It wasn't just the land. It was the air. The wind. The sun.

It was the **world** itself.

Barry had always felt connected to this piece of land behind the old fence post. His mother called it "just a dry patch," but Barry knew it had personality. He swore it hummed in summer, curled like a sleeping animal in the cold, and whispered when no one else was around. But on that day, it became something else entirely.

A different kind of heat touched his face. A thin breeze spun around him, warm and circular. The clouds didn't move, but the sky shimmered. And the earth...

The **earth shook**.

A tremor, not sharp or loud—but rolling, like a giant beneath the soil was adjusting in its sleep. A perfect oval of land, right where Barry stood, rose just a few inches.

"Whoa!" Barry shouted, stumbling back, eyes wide.

It was like the ground had breathed. He crouched to touch it. The soil felt hot, then cold, then suddenly moist, as if drenched in unseen rain. Static crackled through the weeds and into Barry's hands.

-Flash!

-Snap!

-Crack!

-Flash!

A brilliant white bolt arced into the sky. No thunder followed. Just silence. Then another tremor—softer this time.

"Oh wow!" Barry gasped, grinning now.

"I am so lucky!"

He didn't understand how rare this was.

Above him, beyond Earth's magnetosphere, a delicate dance had just ended: the sun had completed a micro-wobble, a gravitational tug that subtly shifted its axial field. These weren't events recorded by school textbooks. This was an ancient astronomical anomaly—one that disturbed the silence of space.

And someone had noticed.

From a distant quadrant of the galaxy, nestled near the remains of a red supergiant, a crystalline planet pulsed with awareness.

Krypton.

Within its glistening halls, an alarm whispered across thousands of sensor-stones. Guardians—cloaked in robes of interwoven metals and minerals—gathered around their observatory crystals. Dozens of them stood motionless, hands hovering above holographic rings made of refracted starlight.

They reviewed the anomaly.

"This subject... is Barry Allen," said Guardian One.

"He's a young human specimen," confirmed Guardian Two.

"He is witness to a rare phenomenon," added Guardian Three.

The transmission from Earth had been faint, but observable through the multi-spectrum array: a point of energy in the center of the Earth's plains—raw, pulsing, **interactive**.

A living response to a cosmic signal.

The Guardians turned to their trusted scout. Cloaked in stillness, eyes soft yet powerful—stood the Martian survivor known as **J'onn J'onzz**, the **Martian Manhunter**.

He bowed, silent.

"Martian Manhunter, prepare yourself," said Guardian One.

"This subject will be for you to observe," said Guardian Two.

"We will name him *The Flash*," said Guardian Three. "As it is what we came to observe."

The crystalline board beneath them lit up in a whirl of shifting codes.

"Load a crystal," ordered Guardian Two.

"Prepare the genome board," added Guardian One.

"Flash the scene. Boot the program into the Earth subject. This Flash must remain visible from Krypton at all times."

The crystalline matrix formed a spiral, and the pulse was sent. Not through space—but through **time**.

Back on Earth, Barry leaned closer to the lot. He had to know what had changed. He reached down...

-Flash!

-Snap!

-Crack!

The air froze. Everything around him—birds, insects, the rolling wind—paused in place, suspended in a strange shimmer.

An orb emerged. It hovered silently before him, casting a pale glow that bent the sunlight. From within, a spark of movement—alien and beautiful.

The orb burst with light—and Barry fell.

His vision blurred. His limbs twitched. He lay flat on the raised plot, but something **was happening** to him. Not like pain—like... transformation.

Light moved around him, not just on the outside but within. It was like a **program**—something being installed.

The Kryptonian signal had found its target.

The orb transmitted a lattice of crystalline code, an encoded sequence birthed in the Kryptonian archives—originally meant to preserve memory, history, time. But now, it was altering Barry Allen's body.

He didn't scream. He breathed.

Slow. Calm. Transfixed.

Then, rising like a phantom, Barry stood. His eyes no longer blinked at human speed. He saw patterns in the air. Magnetic fields arched across the plains like rivers of neon. Every gust of wind moved with intention. The grass bent in calculated angles.

He stared at his hands, turned them over. Sparks flickered across his fingertips.

And then—

He *moved*.

Not walked. Not ran. Moved—across the lot in a blink. He had traveled twenty yards and back before his shadow caught up.

His mouth opened slightly.

"This is a gift. But it is also a key. Use it well."

He heard the voice inside his chest.

Still Earth. Still sky.

But now he could see **time**. Not in moments or memories—but in spirals, probabilities, and lines. Every tree, every cloud cast shadows not just on the ground—but across **futures**.

The plot had awakened something within him—and something ancient outside him had responded.

In Krypton's temple, the Guardians watched.

"Program loaded," said Guardian One.

"Martian Manhunter will observe," said Guardian Two.

"And the Flash... will remember," finished Guardian Three.

Barry stood alone in the silence. The orb had vanished. The ground had stopped shaking. The temperature returned to normal.

But **he** had changed.

He tapped his wrist again. Raised a finger to his ear. Checked his eyes, his brow, his knees. Still himself. Still flesh and bone.

But something... new pulsed in him.

He saw it when he looked around. The prism of energy above the horizon. The bending lattice of electrical arcs in the sky. The pull of time like a rubber band.

He could step into it.

With a thought, Barry vanished. Then reappeared. Then again. Then three versions of him blinked into place—each showing a second of movement ahead, behind, and sideways. Time **rippled** around him.

This was real.

He dropped to his knees and dug into the dirt—his hands moving faster than he realized. He found rock, root, iron shard, a fossil—all in under a breath.

And then he smiled.

The Flash wasn't just a title. It was a **destiny**.

Above Earth, J'onn J'onzz stood alone in his craft, watching the boy. A faint sadness played across his green features.

"He has the gift," he whispered to himself.
"And the burden."

From behind him, the Guardians' voices echoed through the transmission crystal.

"Watch him, J'onn. He may be our link."
"Observe the anomaly. Protect the subject."
"We have no knowledge of what this Flash may become."

J'onn nodded.

"I will stay close."

Barry Allen ran again—across the lot, across the wind, across a **moment** he didn't yet understand.

But even then, somewhere in the swirl of probability and lightning, he felt it:

He would never be just a boy again.

He had been **seen**, encoded, and named.

And now he could run.

Faster than thought.

Faster than light.

Faster than **time**.

Collateral Regret

By Kaveh Shirazi

"I apologize." In my own words, I pronounced the shame that had festered in my heart and now spilled into the ears of my daughter.

"A monster!" I gasped, my breath becoming shallow and frantic. *How could I?*

I am such an idiot!

I had spent weeks binging on coffee, indulging in marijuana and chocolates, drowning it all out.

"I fucking drowned it all out!"

"God, I'm fucking ruined!" I yelled.

"What is the matter with you, Dad? Are you okay?" she asked, concern laced in her voice.

Well, I thought to myself.

I had been offered \$32,000 to launch a barrage of projectiles into Iran. I thought it was a joke.

Now, I am one of the most wanted people in the world.

I was cold and frightened.

The signature of a good surgeon, I mused quietly.

"Nothing, my love," I replied to my daughter.

Yet, fear gnawed at me. My livelihood was destroyed, lost to the sick imagery of war and the cold, soulless abyss of a city jail.

"What an idiot!" I scolded myself.

For years, I had stared at that advertisement, always assuming it was a joke.

Well, I'm going to click it! I had thought.

I'm going to kill innocent people today.

And I did.

Twenty-four hours after the transaction, I went to Starbucks for a caramel coffee. Then, the most disturbing sound filled my ears—

The drowning roar of missiles launching.

"BOOM!"

"BOOM!"

"POW!"

Explosion.

I thought it was just a joke.

Now, I am ruined.

I have ruined my life—
And possibly the life of my daughter.

What am I going to do?

As I sat in that dimly lit coffee shop, watching the foam dissipate from my untouched caramel coffee, my mind spiraled into the past. How had I let it come to this? I wasn't a killer. I wasn't a terrorist. I was just an average man, desperate and naive.

The job market had been unkind. My skills, once revered, had been rendered obsolete in a world moving faster than I could catch up. It had been months of overdue bills, of my daughter looking at me with hopeful eyes, waiting for me to provide, and me failing over and over again.

Then I saw the ad.

"Looking for a quick payout? Willing to click a button to change the course of history? \$32,000 guaranteed!"

It had to be a scam. It *had* to be.

But desperation makes a man blind. It makes him reckless. It makes him stupid.

So I clicked.

At first, it was harmless. A questionnaire—where I lived, my economic status, my beliefs. Then the terms and conditions, long and filled with legal jargon that I skimmed through, agreeing to whatever it said just to get to the end.

Then, the final button.

Launch.

It didn't say what I was launching. There were no details, no consequences laid out in fine print. Just a button. A simple, stupid button.

And I pressed it.

Now, the news played endlessly on every screen around me. Reports of the devastation. Cities in ruin. Innocent lives lost. And my name, soon to be plastered alongside war criminals, extremists, and radicals.

I gripped the table, nausea rolling in my stomach. My daughter sat across from me, still looking at me with innocent, trusting eyes. She didn't know. She couldn't know.

"Dad, are you sure you're okay?" she asked again.

I forced a smile, but my hands trembled as I lifted the coffee cup to my lips.

"I'm fine, sweetheart," I lied.

Inside, I was already dead.

The weight of my actions sat heavy on my chest, suffocating me. Each breath felt like an admission of guilt. My hands, steady once, were now shaky, restless. I looked at my daughter again, her bright eyes so full of life, so free from the burdens I now carried. If she knew the truth, would she ever forgive me? Would she ever look at me the same way again?

I needed to fix this.

But how do you undo something of this magnitude? How do you atone for a crime so immense that it echoes through history? The thought of turning myself in crossed my mind. Maybe a confession would grant me some sliver of peace. Maybe the world needed to know that I wasn't some faceless villain hiding behind a screen—I was just a man who made a terrible, irreversible mistake.

But then, what would happen to her?

If I disappeared into a prison cell, who would take care of her? Who would protect her from the world, from the consequences of my actions? She didn't deserve this. I had to find another way.

I started researching, scouring the dark corners of the internet for anything—ways to disappear, ways to erase digital footprints, ways to escape the fate I had sealed for myself. Every article, every post felt futile. The reach of those in power was infinite. There was nowhere to run.

Paranoia began to settle in. Every time I stepped outside, I felt watched. Every police siren made my heart lurch in my chest. The news reports began hinting at their search narrowing. The government was tracking down those responsible. It was only a matter of time.

I needed to leave.

I pulled my daughter aside one evening, forcing a reassuring smile onto my face.

"We're going on a trip," I told her.

"A trip? Where?"

"Somewhere new. An adventure. Just you and me."

She grinned, oblivious to the storm raging inside me. "Like a vacation?"

I nodded, though this was no vacation. This was survival.

I packed what little we had, withdrew the remaining money from my account, and left behind the life we knew. We moved from city to city, never staying in one place for too long. I changed my name, grew out my beard, dyed my hair. Every step forward was a desperate attempt to stay one step ahead of the consequences chasing me.

But I couldn't run forever.

One night, as we sat in a motel room, the weight of it all came crashing down. I looked at my daughter, sleeping soundly, unaware of the chaos surrounding us. I had stolen her innocence. I had taken away her chance at a normal life.

Tears burned my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, though she couldn't hear me. "I'm so sorry."

And as the red and blue lights flashed outside our window, as the sound of boots echoed down the hallway, I knew—

It was over.

I had sealed my fate the moment I clicked that button.

I was frightened, and so it came naturally to me to rise up out of my seat and reach for the telephone. My hands trembled as I dialed the familiar number, my breath shallow and uneven. My mind raced with fear, my heart pounding in my chest as the call connected.

"Hello," I said into the receiver, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Hi," responded the comforting but concerned voice of my grandmother.

"I need you here right away!" I pleaded, desperation clawing at my throat. "I need you to take Dkaumi! I need you to take her now!"

I turned on the television, and the breaking news headline flashed across the screen in bold, glaring letters: **NUCLEAR DISASTER IN IRAN.**

My stomach twisted into knots as I watched the horrifying footage. The screen showed chaos—billowing clouds of fire and smoke consuming the Iranian airport. People were screaming, running for shelter, their faces contorted with terror. The earth shook beneath them as explosions ripped through the air.

"Blast!" "Boom!" "Pow!"

The sounds of destruction echoed in my ears as though I were right there, trapped in the inferno. My knees buckled, and I gripped the arm of the couch to steady myself. A suffocating wave of sorrow and guilt washed over me, heavier than anything I had ever known. Why did I feel this way? Was it because I was safe

while so many others suffered? Because I knew that in some way, our world had changed forever? The weight of lamentation exceeded my natural senses, pressing down on my soul like an unbearable burden.

"Ahhhhhhh!" "Ahhhhhhh!" "Ahhhhhhh!" I screamed, my voice raw with agony, but there was no one to hear me. No one to stop the madness unfolding before my eyes.

Just then, a car pulled up into the driveway. I peered through the window with tear-blurred vision. My sister, Klujin Nevirted, stepped out. Her face was pale, her eyes wide with urgency. She had seen the reports on television and had come immediately.

"I'm ready to take Dkaumi to a safe place," she said firmly.

There was no time to hesitate. My daughter, my precious little girl, needed to be as far away from danger as possible. My heart clenched as I watched her gather her things, her innocent eyes filled with confusion and fear. She didn't fully understand what was happening, but she knew something was wrong.

She climbed into the car, and my sister gave me a reassuring nod before they drove away. I stood motionless in the doorway, watching until their tail lights disappeared down the street. Then, I turned back into the house, feeling hollow and lost.

The silence engulfed me. My legs gave out, and I collapsed onto the floor, my body wracked with sobs.

"Ahhhrghspm mmmbnbm huuugh," I choked on my cries, rocking back and forth as grief overtook me.

"What am I going to do?" I whispered to no one, the question hanging in the air, unanswered, as the world outside burned in chaos.

Hours passed, but time felt meaningless. I sat in the dim glow of the television, watching the destruction unfold on repeat. My mind was numb, my body drained. And yet, somewhere deep inside, a flicker of determination ignited. I couldn't change what had happened, but I could still act. I wiped my tears, took a deep breath, and stood up. It was time to face whatever came next.

Collateral Regret: Part II

By Kaveh Shirazi

"Really!" she shouted.

It was Kaylie, the neighbor. She had read everything about me—my name, the news, the speculation.

"What the fuck!"

I slammed the door behind me, holding my daughter tightly by the hand.

"Dkaumi," I thought. "Dkaumi, I failed you."

"What have I done!" I shouted aloud.

"Oh my goodness!" I whimpered.

"Dad!" Dkaumi cried. Her small voice cracked with fear and confusion.

"What happened!?" she asked. Dkaumi was only seven. She wanted answers. She deserved them. But all I could think about was how my sister Klujin—who I had trusted—was secretly following us.

It was just me and Dkaumi in the car. We were supposed to be fleeing to safety. But Klujin had turned around. I caught a glimpse of her vehicle in the rearview mirror, tailing us.

I slammed my foot on the gas. The car jolted forward, sparks of acceleration igniting from the wheels. We were on the freeway, doing eighty-five miles per hour, heading out of the area.

"Dad, why!!!!" Dkaumi sobbed.

Far from our speeding car, a mobile unit of civilian enforcers and practitioners had assembled at the charred remains of the Iranian airport. The destruction from the rocket attack had left a landscape of smoldering rubble and blackened steel.

They had a suspect, and they knew his name.

"It's something that was available to everyone on the internet!" said one of the young Iranian investigators, shaking his head in disbelief.

Beside him stood Officer Bahram Tofighi, a seasoned investigator with a permanent furrow in his brow and a heavy presence that silenced those around him.

"How do you suppose people get away with things like that?" Officer Tofighi asked, glancing down at the tablet with Ahmed's image and digital profile.

"It could have happened to anybody," replied the younger officer.

"I've been tempted myself sometimes—needing money..."

Back on the road, the wind howled against the car's frame. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

"Dkaumi, you have to stay quiet!" I said. My voice trembled. "I have just done something that I regret very much."

"But I had to do it!"

"Aaughrgh! Mhmgh!" she whimpered, half-scared, half-excited, holding on to her seat.

The car finally slowed. I needed fuel. I tried to forget about the internet, the laptop, the anonymous instructions, and the credit card I had used to destroy the Iranian airport—and the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, of families.

A flashing light caught my attention.

An Iranian police cruiser pulled up. The officer hadn't yet noticed our frantic escape.

The vehicles were mostly concentrated at the epicenter of the nuclear blast.

The officer approached my car, casual but alert.

"Hello, sir. How are you?" he asked.

I couldn't fake a smile. I pointed behind him.

"Look at the disaster behind you!" I cried.

He turned. His eyes widened as he took in the horrific scene—the scorched airport, the chaos, the broken skyline. And without another word, he turned and ran back to his vehicle, speeding off toward the scene.

It was a miracle. I had gotten away with it. Again.

I drove to the nearest gas station, heart still pounding, hands shaking as I filled the tank.

But the reprieve was short.

The next day, the press had plastered my image across every screen in the nation.

"Looks like he's definitely a suspect," a journalist said on a live report, holding up a blurry surveillance photo.

"That person destroyed an airport!" another anchor exclaimed.

"That person killed hundreds of people! The airplanes were fully loaded with civilians."

And all I could hear in my head, louder than the reporters, louder than the explosions, was my own voice—the voice I didn't want to believe was mine.

"And went to sleep like nothing happened!"

"People talk about me, and I know what they're saying!"

"I have to get out of here!"

"I'm not just guilty, I'm the one who did it!"

"I did it on the internet!"

"It's something that was available to everyone on the internet!"

"I knew I could destroy the lives of people!"

"I did it anyways!"

"I did it for \$35,000, and there should be more money coming!"

"Dad, why!!!!" Dkaumi's cry from the car echoed in my head again and again.

"Who let them in the airport!?" I shouted at the windshield, tears dripping from my cheeks onto the steering wheel.

The guilt was no longer something I could hide or run from. It ate at me. My breath was shallow. My lips were cracked from dehydration and stress.

I had destroyed so much, and for what?

I gripped the wheel harder.

I needed to disappear, and fast. The world was closing in.

But now, with Dkaumi in the backseat, quietly sobbing, her tiny fingers clutching her toy rabbit, I didn't just have myself to think about.

I had ruined her life too.

And that might be the greatest crime of all.

Espionage and the Litter Box

By Jonathan Olvera

Xavier was asleep on his humble bed, in his small room. The faded blue sheets were tangled around him like vines, and the hum of the fan mixed with the subtle bubbling of the teapot in the kitchen. He had been put to sleep by the smell of herbal tea—lavender, lemon balm, chamomile—all simmering together in a ceramic pot, a natural remedy to unrest and overthinking.

But Xavier wasn't just dreaming. He was slipping. Slipping into something else entirely.

He floated in a trance—somewhere between memory and the green pulsing energy of the universe. The lines between thought and reality twisted. Language came

undone, and his own words spun around him like puzzle pieces searching for a frame. The whole scene blurred in clouds of fragrant steam, glowing white puffs that shimmered with quiet magic.

Before him appeared four glowing orbs—spinning, pulsing, humming with the soft tones of reality itself. These were no ordinary orbs. They were the gates between dimensions. Between waking life and something much, much weirder.

A portal opened.

And then—he woke up.

Kind of.

There was a voice.

"Meow."

It sounded simple. Harmless. Like a normal cat meow.

But then...

"I will use it on the human."

The voice was calm. Calculated. Feline.

"It's been a long time observing this specific individual," the voice continued. "I am a specialist with the Foreign Service. My job is to get detailed information to the other side."

"Meow."

Xavier blinked rapidly and sat up in bed. The sun was barely up, casting a soft yellow glow across the room. His cat, a black-and-white fuzzball named Pudding, was perched on the windowsill, tail flicking thoughtfully.

"Wow, that was a crazy dream," Xavier mumbled.

"Meow," said Pudding. "Wake up, human."

Xavier's brain short-circuited. "What the—?"

"You can understand me!?" the cat said, wide-eyed.

"Yes!" Xavier yelped. "You're speaking English!"

The cat gasped. "Oh no! Yikes! Protocol breach! This is not supposed to happen! I need backup meows immediately!"

Xavier stared. "You're... you're not just a cat, are you?"

Pudding hissed dramatically and leapt onto the floor. "I *knew* I should have chosen a more discreet disguise. But nooo, I had to pick the adorable tabby variant with expressive eyebrows."

"Disguise?" said Xavier. "What are you talking about?!"

"I'm not just a house cat!" Pudding barked. (Yes, barked.) "I'm Agent M33-0W of the Foreign Observation Feline Service—or F.O.F.S.—an elite interdimensional intelligence agency. And YOU just broke the sound barrier of pet communication!"

"I knew there was something fishy about you cats..." Xavier rubbed his temples. "Always staring at corners. Judging me from atop the fridge."

The cat began to pace frantically. "This is catastrophic. I have several emergency protocols for this situation, but none of them are appropriate for humans with bed hair and herbal tea breath!"

"What are you going to do?" Xavier asked.

Pudding leapt into the air, did a front flip, landed in the laundry basket, and vanished.

"Where did you go?" Xavier called.

A pair of glowing green eyes peered out from under a hoodie. "I'm hiding. Obviously."

"Fix what you did!" the cat shouted.

"I didn't do anything!" Xavier shouted back. "And by the way, *maybe* you could be more polite about the litter box next time!"

There was a stunned silence.

"Wow. Or rather, *meow*," came the feline reply. "You wanna go there, huh? You leave the bathroom door open and listen to pop music in the shower."

"That was *one* time!" Xavier cried.

The room fell into a bizarre silence, broken only by the occasional rustling of fur beneath the bed. Then Pudding reemerged cautiously, fur fluffed like a scared squirrel.

"I have to report this. My mission's compromised," the cat whispered, clicking his claws together like a tiny typewriter. "I'll need to send a message to Central Whiskers."

"Is that... like your HQ?"

"Yes, located at the base of the Sphinx. Don't ask how we fit all the equipment inside—just know we can. But first... we must erase your memory."

"What!?" Xavier stepped back.

"It's standard F.O.F.S. protocol. If a human gains awareness of feline operations, the only choices are: memory wipe, or recruitment."

Xavier blinked. "Recruitment?"

"Yes," said Pudding slowly. "We've never had a human operative before. But you do drink lavender tea. That's something."

Xavier looked around his messy room, still a little unsure if he was awake. "Okay... if I join, do I get to wear a cool suit?"

The cat paused. "Only if you stop leaving your socks under the couch."

"Deal."

Pudding stood on his hind legs and gave a solemn nod. "Then the alliance is forged."

From under the bed, he dragged out a small glowing collar and tossed it to Xavier. It sparkled like starlight. "Put this on your wrist. It's your translator and communicator. Don't lose it. And don't—*do not*—use it to prank call raccoons. We're still cleaning up that mess in Sector G."

Xavier fastened it on. It hummed with energy. He smiled.

"So... what now?"

Pudding narrowed his eyes and licked his paw. "Now? Now we train. At dawn. In the alley behind the bakery."

"Why there?"

"Because the pigeons are spies," Pudding whispered. "And they're watching."

And so began the strangest chapter of Xavier's life. From quiet tea nights to rooftop chases and decoding meows, from secret cat council meetings under full moons to learning laser-pointer combat, Xavier was no longer just a sleepy guy in a small room.

He was a full-fledged operative.

And his cat?

Well, he was still leaving paw prints in the sink.

In the Shadow of Suns and Kings

by Jonathan Olvera

Dedicated to Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici, and to all who served the good and truth-filled cause, in labor, in light, and in exile.

The sea was cold beneath the wooden hull of the royal galley, but colder still were the chains that bound Jonathan Olvera to the shadows. Saltwater soaked his cuffs. A lantern swayed overhead, casting prison bars of light across his face. He was not a criminal, but his thoughts had been deemed dangerous—too dangerous to be free. Thoughts of liberty, of calendars not drawn by the Church, of men not measured by gold or crown.

They called him **Aloe Vera**—first as mockery for the healing tinctures he offered to seasick deckhands, and later with reverence. Word had spread of his calm defiance, of the way he spoke of stars and silence like scriptures. His punishment had been issued directly by the ruling monarch: he was to serve under **Galileo Galilei**, the Crown’s most precious heretic—brilliant, but watched.

Jonathan was dragged across Europe in silence, under guard, into Florence where Galileo’s observatory stood like a monument to forbidden light. There, in the hills beyond the shadow of Rome’s cathedral towers, the young man labored under the sun and studied by night. Galileo rarely spoke except when the stars demanded it.

“You are not here to worship kings,” the old astronomer said once, brushing dust off a brass sextant. “You are here to understand what even kings cannot stop—**motion.**”

Jonathan listened closely, just as he always had. Life had taught him to listen. To obey the rhythm of nature. And yet, he had always known that obedience alone would not be enough. There had to be something more—something useful.

He remembered:

When I was a young man, growing into adulthood—or so I thought I was—I had very many challenges. I wasn’t challenged physically like many people are with immediate violence.

Life is a long journey—is it a journey we have to experience? Is it a duty to serve another?

My interpretation of life: I wanted it to be useful.

I spent many days and years looking into my memories of distant past—colorful.

If this life was a temple—and some are sure that it is—it would be decorated with the acts of hard-working people, the fruits of distant lands, the heat of the Sun.

Ellipses—shades and hard rules.

Learning many things—I always thought to listen and pay very much attention—the sun always caught my attention, and so did many other bodies in the sky.

They seemed to speak. They seemed to beckon—the glimmers and the passages of the Earthly Kingdom, they echoed in synchrony.

The Earth cried and burned. It flooded.

I could see that work was good—I could see myself working dutifully—keeping note of the sun, the bodies in the sky, the need for men to work—collect water, make food, and fair trade.

It was something that I had to do—I was charged with this responsibility. I had to make an advance, and I would succeed.

My life depended on it.

Jonathan served Galileo with exactness, translating observations, refining star charts, and keeping track of planetary alignments. But in the quiet hours between dusk and midnight, he wrote. He called them the *Letters from the Root*, sealed with a hand-carved sigil—an aloe stalk under a crescent moon. These letters were sent by bread peddlers, desert traders, and fringe believers to outposts across the Mediterranean and beyond.

“I do not seek to rule,” he wrote in one, “but to **record**. To count the will of the people like stars—each one shining with its own truth, burning not for permission, but because it must.”

The letters reached the wrong ears.

One morning, soldiers arrived in the observatory tower with an edict in wax and iron.

“By decree of King Mosiah,” one announced, “Jonathan Olvera, also known as Aloe Vera, is sentenced to exile in Desolation—the southern lands beyond the frontier. You will leave before sundown.”

Jonathan turned to Galileo, who offered him only a cracked lens.

“Truth burns brightest where there is no shade,” the old man whispered.

The journey to Desolation took thirteen days. The air was thick with sand and judgment. The land was bare, cursed, and holy all at once. There were ruins of temples long buried, paths walked by wandering prophets, and stones still stained by forgotten wars.

But Jonathan did not die there.

He built.

First with his hands: mud bricks, water traps, sundials, sun-tempered ovens. Then with his mind: agreements marked not by blood, but by handprint and honor. He called them **Covenants of Labor**—a new form of currency rooted in trust. A market formed. So did a community.

The exiles began to refer to their growing outpost not as a prison, but as a garden. They named it **Aloe**, after the man who had made it livable. He refused the title of leader and instead carved their promises into stone, into soil, and into sky.

“I don’t rule,” he told a visiting emissary. “I witness.”

“You dare challenge the divine order of King Mosiah?”

“I don’t challenge him. I reflect him—**through the lens of the people.**”

Over time, Aloe became not just a place but a principle. Mormons began copying the structure of covenant commerce. Chinese traders brought gifts of paper and ink to formalize the labor tallies. Even some of the King’s own advisors began writing to Aloe in secret, requesting guidance on grain storage and water regulation.

Still, Jonathan remained a student—not of politics, but of stars.

In the final years of his life, he returned to the first sundial he had built outside his tent in Desolation. The lines had worn away, but the idea had not.

“If life is a temple,” he whispered, “then may its foundation be justice. May its walls be labor. May its roof be stars.”

And as the wind passed through the aloe groves planted by hand, Jonathan smiled. He had not built a kingdom. He had remembered a future.

The Year of the Raptor

By Jonathan Olvera

It was a strange spring in France in the late age of 7700—strange because it was both cold and hot, as if two seasons fought silently in the air. The winds carried the bite of winter, but the sun shone with a heat that made the stones steam in the mornings. Above, the sky was not the soft blue of our age, but a deep, black, starless sea—an empty vault in which the sun burned like a torch in a cave.

This was an age before the shift of the sun, before the heavens took the form we know now. In that time, the shores of Brittany were the heart of a bustling civilization. Carnac, the jewel of the French coast, was a place of stones and trade,

its market alive with the chatter of fishermen, the laughter of children, and the ringing of hammers shaping goods for barter. People came not only to buy and sell, but to learn new skills, forge bonds, and secure alliances that would shape the destinies of tribes.

The leader of France in those days was a man both wise and humble, though he bore the weight of rule with a stern and unbending manner. His name was King Benjamin, and his eyes, sharp as the hawk's, missed nothing. He had a mind for detail and a hand for justice, and in those weeks he was consumed with preparing Carnac's market for the season's great trade fair. Merchants would arrive from the York territory to the north, their speech thick with foreign turns of phrase. Goods from across the European lands—woven cloth, forged blades, carved talismans—would flood the stalls.

Yet the true wonder of that market was not in the crafts of man, but in the rare beasts brought from distant corners of the earth. In that age, the last of the great land predators still walked the world—creatures whose names are whispered now only in legend. Among them was the Velociraptor, a hunter of swift cunning, a beast that once roamed in numbers but was now dwindling toward extinction. Its food, men said, was man himself.

Jonathan, a young man of twenty summers, traveled with the King as a servant, assisting in matters of trade, diplomacy, and the small daily labors that kept a royal journey moving. He had heard tales of the raptor but never seen one alive. He imagined it as a demon from the forest—scaled, sharp of tooth, and wicked of heart.

The King, however, was fascinated by the creature. In the market square, they found one at last: bound in ropes, its long talons curled like knives, its eyes bright with a hateful intelligence. The merchant who had captured it claimed to have done so in a land far across the sea, where the winds screamed over black cliffs and the earth trembled beneath the creature's hunt.

King Benjamin studied the raptor for a long while, walking in a slow circle around it. He asked questions of its strength, its diet, its cunning. The merchant spoke of how it could run faster than any horse, leap higher than a stag, and track prey over miles with an unerring nose for fear.

Perhaps it was in that moment that the King's thoughts began to turn toward destiny. He purchased the beast for a heavy price of silver, taking it away from the market with his men. For many days it remained in his custody, bound yet alive, its yellow gaze fixed always upon him.

Jonathan watched as the King fed it—sometimes with scraps, sometimes with fresh-caught fish from the sea. The King would sit for hours just looking at it, as if weighing some great decision.

On the seventh day, as the market of Carnac roared with trade and the air smelled of roasted meats and burning incense, King Benjamin called his people together. He announced that he would proclaim his kingship to all the tribes, not just as

ruler of France, but as sovereign of all lands he might one day claim. The raptor, he declared, would be the center of this proclamation.

Upon the great stone dais in the heart of Carnac, the King brought forth the beast. The ropes held it, but its tail lashed and its jaws snapped at the air. Before the assembled crowd, King Benjamin took up the sacred instruments of sacrifice—blades of flint, bowls of polished granite, and a single, heavy altar stone.

The raptor's death was swift but terrible. Blood dark as wine poured across the stone, and a great stillness fell over the crowd. Then, in a ritual older than memory, the King took from the creature's flesh and ate.

Those who were there swear they saw something change in his eyes. Where before they were sharp, now they were sharper still—like the glint of the raptor's own. He stood taller, his voice carrying farther as he proclaimed:

"This is the Year One. I am King Benjamin, guided by the cunning of the Raptor. My reign shall be as swift and enduring as its hunt, and my people shall never be prey, but predators upon the earth."

From that day forth, the raptor became the emblem of his banner—its curved claw drawn in black upon red cloth. His laws took on the creature's nature: swift in judgment, merciless to invaders, yet fiercely protective of the land and people. Trade flourished under his rule, and the market of Carnac became a center of the world's commerce.

Jonathan, who had stood at the King's side through it all, would later write that it was not the eating of the raptor's flesh that changed the King, but the act of taking its strength into the heart of his people. It was a symbol, a covenant between man and beast, sealing the beginning of a new age.

The world remembers little of the spring of 7700 before the sun shifted and the sky lost its darkness. But the people of that time remembered, for many generations, that their calendar began not with a birth, nor a victory in battle, but with the death of a beast whose hunger for life became the hunger of a kingdom.

And so the Year One began, and the Raptor King's legacy was carved into the stones of Carnac, where even now the wind seems to whisper the hiss of a predator long gone.

The Platform Promise

By Jonathan Olvera

The sun hung like a molten coin over the river valley, spilling gold across the jagged walls of the quarry. Dust rose in shimmering veils, clinging to skin, hair, and lungs. The river below caught the light in glints, but up here, on the broad terraces where the stone was cut, it was heat, stone, and sweat.

"I've seen it done, White!" I called over the rhythmic clink of chisels and the scrape of steel on diorite. My co-worker, White, was adjusting a chain sling on one of the larger blocks. His uniform, neat as always, clung to his shoulders with damp patches from the afternoon labor.

He turned, eyebrows lifting. "I believe in it," he replied, as if he'd already weighed the idea in his mind and found it worth the gamble. He didn't ask what "it" was. We'd been talking for weeks now about my idea — my little rebellion disguised as agriculture.

I was twenty-three, Spanish-Nazarene by birth, wearing the green trousers and dark shirt of the Sonora labor corps. My boots were cracked from the stone dust, my palms calloused into thick leather from months of quarry work. But under the noise and repetition, I was always rehearsing. Not just the work orders of the day, but my pitch.

"This quarry isn't everything," I told him, scanning the neat lines of cut stone, each block fitted to its twin in the pattern the engineers dictated. The officers loved their symmetry. They claimed it was "imperial discipline," but it felt more like chains.

White gave a faint smile, the kind you give when you already know the next line. "I also ponder."

"Food production," I said, leaning on my mallet. "And the collection of seeds."

"It's all good work," White said mildly.

"I have a better idea." I could hear my own eagerness sharpening my voice.

We were standing in one of the lower terraces where the diorite met a seam of sodium-rich stone. The officers kept an eye on how the patterns were laid — the blocks must match their grand design, a geometric harmony meant to impress senators and merchants alike. But I saw something else: resources. Minerals for soil. Heat storage for winter crops. The seeds of my plan were right under my boots.

"I have lots of foolish ideas," White said, settling his weight against a block as if to rest. "Really, I have time to listen. I like working on things."

His patience was one of the reasons I kept talking to him. He never rushed me, even when the foremen barked orders.

"To make food," I said again, as if repeating it could make it more real.

"Do you think they would let you?" White asked, his tone flat but not unkind. He meant the authorities — the garden masters of the Sonora, who kept a tight grip on all food production in the desert. To plant without permission was to invite punishment. And yet...

"I can't simply be a day laborer," I said. "Soon I will accomplish all things."

"I've been there before," he replied, his voice softer now, as if admitting to old dreams.

"Our method," I continued, "on the platform. That is the promise." I was rehearsing again — the words I'd use before a panel of officers or merchants, words meant to sound practical, not dangerous.

"I believe in it," White said again, his affirmation simple and solid as the blocks we cut.

"I want to do it," I told him. "I want to make a new formula for food production — it would change everything."

White frowned slightly. "It is something that some people might take as cruel or overbearing."

"Spare me," I laughed. "We've talked about it."

He tilted his head. "Do you have plans to do something?"

"No one likes to lose, and no one likes to look like a fool," I said, adjusting my gloves. "Things aren't always visible or obvious. It's going to take time to assemble the whole thing."

"That sounds interesting," he said, and I knew he meant it.

Months I'd been thinking — about the quarry, the stone, the river, the way heat baked into certain minerals. Diorite was dense, sodium stone could leach salts into soil. In the right proportions, you could make a planter that fed itself. No need for imported fertilizer, no dependency on the garden masters. Just a block of stone and a handful of seeds.

"In better times," White said, more to himself than to me.

"If you can assist me," I said, "that is what we will do."

"What else is there to do?" he asked with a small shrug.

"Sure," he added after a pause.

The day wore on. The sun dragged its way toward the far cliffs, shadows creeping up the quarry walls. The officers paced along the upper platforms, watching, always watching. We cut, we hauled, we laid the blocks into place like pieces in a puzzle none of us had designed.

When the bells finally rang, their clang echoing off stone, the great gates at the river docks swung open. Work was done for the day.

"It is time now!" White shouted, unhooking his harness.

"Let's get out of here!" I answered, yanking off my gloves and dusting the grit from my boots.

"I am like him!" I said to no one in particular, raising my voice over the shuffle of departing workers. "I put all my trust in him!"

"Amen!" White called back, grinning.

"Thank you very much — for your service," I told him.

"Good afternoon to you as well," he said, heading for the gate.

We parted ways there. I lingered a moment, stretching the tight cords of muscle in my arms, rolling my shoulders against the knots. "Blah, blah," I muttered to myself, mocking the officers' endless lectures about pattern and order.

"Gathering stone," I said aloud, tasting the words. "Mind your diet. Let's have one."

Silly ideas. And yet, not so silly if they worked.

The path home wound along the river's edge, the quarry's stone face looming behind me. I kept my eyes on the water, watching how the current shifted where the ships docked. That was another piece of it — the river could bring not just stone, but soil, silt, seeds from upriver farms. If the right stones were arranged in the right pattern, the river could feed the blocks, the blocks could feed the plants, and the plants... well, they could feed the people.

The import and the new location is a work of science, I thought. Not the kind of science the officers cared for — theirs was the science of control, of keeping hands and mouths dependent. Mine was the science of release.

I had always been inspired by the Sonora — the red horizons, the cactus blossoms after a rare rain, the whisper of wind between stones. The possibilities were endless. Endless if one could avoid the gaze of those who claimed ownership over every stalk and seed.

"Well, I can't wait to get to it," I murmured, a smile breaking across my face.

I gave thanks, as I always did, for the hands at work and the feet on the stones. For White, patient and unshaken. For the old masons who taught me to read the grain in a block, to listen for the clean ring of a true cut. And for the ones who had come before us — ancestors and perished folk, buried in the dust of older quarries, whose names were never written but whose work still stood.

There's nothing else more truthful and righteous, I thought. And that was the truth that would carry me forward — through the quarry gates, through the watching eyes, and into the work that could change everything.

Crown of Heat: A Memoir of 2025

by Jonathan Olvera

It was a very hot and dry morning in the Southwest Territory. By midday, around three o'clock, the sun cast long shadows across the landscape. The mountains stood tall, and beneath them teemed the jolts of life—birds, insects, hidden springs, and the unseen warmth that nourished both soil and spirit. Despite the dryness, there was fruit to be collected. There was direction in the governance of this place, a land where the sun always shines. It was as though a crown—brilliant, golden, and eternal—rested above this desert, making it both unforgiving and sacred.

I rose that morning, wiped the sweat from my brow, and said aloud, “Oh my, it’s terribly, terribly hot. It feels as if the sun itself is on fire, and yet the rain falls upon my head, my face, and my shoulder.”

Some men nearby chuckled. “Jonathan,” one said, “you always speak like the sun is listening to you.”

“Perhaps it is,” I answered with a grin. “Perhaps it is.”

The heat pressed down as I stood upon a platform, one that had been decorated for a wedding just the night before. Now, in the daylight, the same platform was marked with devices to note locations, to record plans, and to honor the traditions of the Indian community who had long called this land home. The new visitors—merchants, workers, dreamers—came to learn from them, to build with them, to add their voices to this land’s song.

“Oh,” I sighed, “there is much work to do.”

The afternoon greeted me in turn, its company stern yet generous, as though saying, *If you will endure my heat, I will grant you strength*. Treaties were spoken of in the shade, agreements made between peoples and workers. It was another day to labor, another day to search the offices for assignments: work in the quarry, work with tobacco, with maize, with beans. Always work. Always movement.

I thought to myself, *Goodness, what will become of this place?* I could see it even then: a future where the quarries would hum with progress, the fields heavy with harvests, the villages and towns alive with laughter. *Yes, I mused, this place will one day be known as a fruitful garden.*

And though it was hot—so hot that the air shimmered above the ground—it was still beautiful. The desert was always alive, if one knew where to look. The sun would climb high into the sky, burning fiercely, almost as if speaking to us. And when it descended, the moon followed faithfully, quiet and watchful. At night the stars pierced the black canvas of heaven with a brilliance so pure, it seemed as though the very hand of God had brushed them there for our comfort.

"How amazing," I often whispered to myself. And others, seeing me stand still under the vast night, would stop and look too. In those moments, silence was our prayer.

Back in my quarters, I prepared for another day's work. I washed my gloves, cleaned the dust from my boots, and ran water through my hair. Water—clear, cool, blessed water—was a gift in this desert. To hold it in your hands was to feel history itself: thousands of years of struggle, migration, cultivation, and survival.

As I cupped the water, I thought, *How many before me have done this same thing? How many hands, brown and weathered, have lifted water to their lips and given thanks?*

Gratitude became my ritual. Each day, I promised myself that no matter how hot, no matter how long, I would take one step forward. I would wash my hands, wash my face, and remember to give thanks. I would keep my boots steady, my rag ready, and my heart set upon the work before me.

"The Lord, our great leader," I would say to myself, "has not left us. This land is His reminder. This labor is His lesson. This progress, slow and steady, is His glory."

Others sometimes laughed at my seriousness. One man, while sharpening his tools, teased, "Jonathan, you speak like a preacher. Always with your promises and prayers."

"Maybe so," I answered with a smile. "But a man needs both sweat and faith if he's to survive here."

The man nodded after a pause. "Maybe you're right."

And so the days turned, one after another, like stones laid carefully in a long path. Work in the quarries, labor in the fields, tending to maize and beans. The hum of tools, the rhythm of shovels, the laughter of children running between the rows of crops. The desert tested us daily, yet it also shaped us into a people of resilience, a people who could endure, and a people who could dream.

When the evening came, I often sat upon the ridge overlooking the settlement. The air cooled slightly, and a breeze carried with it the faint smell of mesquite. I would reflect: *This year, this 2025, what will I remember?*

I will remember the heat that burned but never destroyed.

I will remember the people, their voices rising like a chorus against the harsh wind.

I will remember the water, every drop a sacred gift.

I will remember the vision of fields and quarries, of progress and harvests, of treaties and unity.

I will remember gratitude.

And perhaps, most of all, I will remember the crown—the crown of heat, of light, of the desert sun. It weighed upon us, yes, but it also shone above us, reminding us that even in the harshest of lands, life persists, and God remains.

Each day, I chose to take one step forward. And each step, no matter how small, became part of a larger journey. That is how I will remember the year 2025: not as a time of ease, but as a time of endurance, of labor, of thanksgiving. A time when the desert tested me, and I, in return, learned to speak back to the sun.

“Terribly hot,” I said again one evening, wiping the sweat from my brow. “But thank God—it is also terribly beautiful.”

And with that, I tightened my boots, washed my hands, and prepared for another day.

A Crown of Autumn: A Thanksgiving Memoir

by Jonathan Olvera

Thanksgiving was approaching soon, and the scenery began to change. The lush green tones of spring and summer slowly surrendered, giving way to deeper shades of orange, amber, and crimson. The air, once heavy with heat, now carried a coolness—an autumn breath that swept across the fields and hillsides, whispering through the trees.

It was a new season, a new turning in the cycle of the sun and stars, a new covering for men, women, and children under the wide heavens. The green leaves, once so bright, turned orange and fell in patterns across the earth, dotting the landscape like patches of fire. The cool wind flew across the face of the burning sun, softening its rays and giving good weather to the inhabitants of America. This was good.

It was the season to count blessings—the labor of the land, the fruit gathered, the berries dried and stored, the grain waiting in barns, the fowl roaming in fields. Each harvest spoke of toil, sweat, and faith. Each meal prepared was the result of calloused hands and enduring hope.

I looked across the fields and thought to myself, *Oh, how great this is—the work we have set our hands and feet to. Our labor has not been in vain.*

Another nearby added, “To be grateful, yes, for the faithful workers and servants of the land, who labor so that all may share in companionship.”

The crowd murmured in agreement. Thanksgiving was more than a feast; it was a gathering of hearts in unity.

The day was coming, the day set aside to give thanks. Word spread across the land: a feast would be held, a gathering of men and women, children and elders, workers and preachers, craftsmen and salesmen, all meeting in a spirit of gratitude. It would be a time of roasted fowl and steaming pots, of fresh bread and the scent of herbs, of laughter echoing across the quarries and hilltops.

“Let us prepare!” I cried, filled with good cheer. “Let us brew our beer, roast our fowl, and gather our harvests! Let us forgive one another and return to our homes with praise on our lips and thanksgiving in our hearts!”

The moon itself seemed eager, waiting for the sun to set so preparations could begin. On the hillsides, mothers and children worked side by side, gathering herbs,

pressing apples, laying linens across long tables. The men returned from the quarries and fields, setting down their burdens, washing the dust from their hands, and lending strength to the building of fires and roasting of meats.

It was magical—this harmony between labor and nature, between toil and joy. The sun, low in the sky, seemed to cherish the moment, glowing warmly as if it too prepared for the feast. The whole world felt festive, as though autumn itself had laid out a tablecloth of gold and orange leaves, spread across the land in honor of the day.

Thanksgiving was not only a feast of food but a feast of memory. We gave thanks for teachers, who guided our children in wisdom. We gave thanks for waters, rivers that carried blessings, streams that quenched our thirst. We gave thanks for ships that set sail on good journeys, carrying goods and hope to faraway shores. We gave thanks for family, for neighbors, for strangers who became friends at the table.

As the day drew near, lanterns were lit, and music filled the air. Fiddles played, drums kept rhythm, voices lifted in song. Tables were set with roasted turkeys, steaming bowls of potatoes, cranberry sauces gleaming like jewels, bread baked golden and fragrant. There were pies—apple, pumpkin, pecan—lined like treasures, waiting to be enjoyed. Children ran about in laughter, cheeks red from the chill. Elders told stories of seasons past, of harvests gained and hardships overcome.

And then came the prayer. All grew still as heads bowed. “Thank God,” a voice said. “Praise the Lord. Give us many more seasons of harvest and health. Grant us peace in our homes, forgiveness in our hearts, and joy in our labor.”

A chorus of “Amen” followed. And then the feast began.

That day, I looked around the table and thought of what Thanksgiving had always meant to me. It meant remembering the peace and joy I had shared with family and friends. It meant recalling visitors welcomed, pets cherished, and nights filled with laughter and warmth. It meant acknowledging the labor of those who worked in season, those who tilled, sowed, and reaped so that food might bless our tables. It meant forgiving trespasses, settling debts, and beginning anew.

Thanksgiving was not just a holiday. It was a covenant between people and land, between man and God. It was the sacred rhythm of sowing and reaping, of working and resting, of praising and remembering.

And so I give thanks—for the harvest, for the labor, for the fellowship, and for the memories that will remain with me for many years.

That is Thanksgiving. That is what it has always been. And as long as the leaves turn orange and the winds blow cool across the sun, as long as the table is spread and prayers are lifted, Thanksgiving will remain.

For it is not only a feast of food, but a feast of spirit. A festival of gratitude, dressed in autumn colors, glowing like fire against the chill.

Thanksgiving is the crown of autumn, and I wear it gladly.

Ashes of the Fugitive

by Jonathan Olvera

It had been eight weeks since I first went on the run. Eight weeks since the rockets fell, since the sky above Tehran burned with fire and smoke, since I crossed the line from man to monster. I had made a terrible decision—to misuse the special equipment provided to me by someone I once trusted. It was a secret, something I never should have touched.

A computer program, nothing more than lines of code sold to me for \$32,000, had transformed me into the architect of destruction. A simple login, a set of instructions, a digital push of a button, and missiles screamed across the horizon, striking the airport and reducing it to blackened steel and scorched bodies.

My daughter, Dkaumi, had seen it all from our apartment window. Her small face pressed to the glass, she had whimpered as the towers of smoke climbed into the heavens. “Dad, why is the sky on fire?” she asked.

Her voice still echoed in me, cutting sharper than the roar of any explosion.

I couldn’t answer her. I couldn’t answer anyone. What could I say—that I had destroyed my own country for money? For promises of escape? For thirty-five thousand dollars that now felt like cursed blood money?

The night we fled, I told her, “Things are complicated, Kumi. I had to do it. These men... these evil men cannot keep running our home.”

But what I didn’t admit was that I wasn’t sure who was evil anymore. Them—or me.

Now, hunted like an animal, I sped down Iran’s back roads, always searching for valleys, ravines, any scrap of wilderness that could conceal us. Helicopters thundered overhead, their spotlights combing the earth like fingers of God searching for my shame.

“Oh my God, Dkaumi!” I cried as we drove. “We’re going to be hunted like animals!”

Her little voice cracked. “Dad, what happened? Why are they following us? Why are there helicopters in the sky?”

I wanted to shield her from everything, but there was no shield anymore. Only the truth: I had turned our lives into a nightmare.

My sister Klujin had seen us fleeing. She had trailed us for days, sometimes visible in my rearview mirror, other times vanished like a ghost. I didn't know if she wanted to help me or turn me in. Her presence gnawed at me, feeding the nausea in my gut.

I had ruined my life. I was fucking ruined.

The thought consumed me. I needed a firearm. I needed bullets. Every shadow felt like a pursuer. Every knock on a door could be the one that dragged me away in chains. I wasn't a father anymore—I was a fugitive.

The guilt pressed down harder than the helicopters above. How could I atone for a crime so immense it would echo through history? Perhaps confession was my only way forward. Perhaps throwing myself on the mercy of the world would grant me a sliver of amnesty.

But who grants mercy to someone like me? A man who destroyed an airport, who killed hundreds of civilians, who sent families into unending grief—all for money?

Nobody cares about people like me.

I told Dkaumi, almost in a whisper, "Nobody cares about us anymore, Kumi. Nobody."

I collapsed once, right on the floor of a safehouse. Hands over my head, I whimpered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

The cell phone burned in my hand. Should I call for help? Should I surrender? The emergency line stared back at me on the screen, waiting.

And then—
Boom. Boom. Pow.

Another wave of explosions tore through the night. My ears rang. My people screamed in the distance. Men, women, children burned alive. I pressed the phone to my ear but heard nothing but static and cries of agony.

"God save us," someone screamed.
"Allah, Allah, have you forsaken us?"

Their voices became my punishment. My tears dripped onto the cracked screen as I whispered, "What have I done? What am I going to do?"

Hours later, desperate and delirious, I dug into the green grass outside with my bare hands. Beneath the dirt was plastic sheeting—hidden caches from the years of scarcity. I clawed until I made two shallow holes. One for myself, one for Dkaumi.

"This will hide us," I muttered, though I knew it was madness. My fingers bled, my nails bent back, but I dug anyway.

Every moment, I fought the urge to throw my cell phone into the ravine. Yet I also thought of calling my sister, of begging her to rescue Dkaumi even if she left me to rot. But the only certainty was that I needed money. More money for a pistol. More money for ammunition. Survival now had a price tag.

I was no longer Jonathan. No longer even the father my daughter once trusted. Everyone would soon know me as **Kaveh Shirazi**—the traitor of Iran. The world would spit my name.

I hadn't known the missiles I launched would be so powerful. I thought it was sabotage, disruption, nothing more. But the ground itself shook for days, and the airport—the pride of our nation—was reduced to rubble. The heart of Iran stopped beating that day, and I was the one who plunged the knife.

Sometimes, I thought the helicopters circling above ignored me on purpose. Not out of pity, but out of cruelty. As though I was already beneath notice, a cockroach scurrying under their boots. A maggot in the dirt. Too pathetic to even kill.

"Oh my God," I thought, clawing at the ground. "I'm such a loser."

I stared out across the horizon at the skeletal remains of the airport, the crumbled structures that once represented progress, connection, pride. And now? Now they were ash. And I had done it.

One man. One selfish, cowardly man, willing to burn everything for \$35,000 and a chance at escape.

Dkaumi stirred beside me, clutching her rabbit, whispering in her sleep. "Dad..."

Her innocence was the sharpest knife.

I had betrayed my nation. I had betrayed my daughter. I had betrayed myself.

And yet I kept running.

The Arizona Calculator

By Jonathan Olvera

In my Arizona home, as I was accustomed to, I spent my days gazing upon the wonderful gardens of Jill Wright. They were not gardens in the usual sense—not rows of vegetables or beds of flowers—but vast, geometric arrangements of salt, mineral dust, and wild formations teeming with life. Even the structures of sodium seemed to hum. It was a strange, silent beauty that spoke to me.

Each morning, I would sit and watch the way the light moved across the long fields—shimmering channels of phosphory, aluminum, and silver stretching like rivers of light across the desert floor. The minerals twinkled like memories. And in those glimmers, I saw not just the past, but the possibility of a future.

And I had an idea.

No—I **had an idea**.

It came to me like water finally breaching dry land: What if all this—these resources, these signs, this work—could mean more than survival? What if I could mark this place—not just with my labor—but with my name? What if my story could become something that others could use, something useful, simple, and pure?

And so began the birth of the **Arizona Calculator**.

The desert, to most, was exile. But to me, it was clarity. I had not come here in triumph—I had been cast out. Years before, I had escaped captivity aboard a royal ship, fled the courts of monarchs, and dared to question the laws that governed not only land but soul. For this, I was banished. But in the arid silence, I found breath again.

Each day, I worked among the pan resource collectors—shuffling through soil and sediment, analyzing the usual international imports and valuations. The work was dull to others, but I saw beauty in the pattern. I saw **systems**—a hidden math of earth and light.

We would collect sodium, gold, and quartz. Sometimes traces of Luna metal or veins of Joe Rice—rare mineral composites named after eccentric miners of the past. I began to keep notes. At first, simple records. Then observations. Then calculations. Slowly, my notebooks filled with **purpose**.

The labor was repetitive: sorting, recording, shifting incoming shipments, assisting with wage reports, evaluating mineral flow. But every task hinted at something bigger: a **pattern of abundance**, a **map of movement**, a **pulse of nature** too regular to ignore.

And it struck me—what if I could create a tool? A signature device that could do more than record. A machine to **read**, **sense**, and **calculate** the living breath of the desert?

Then came the day the **man from the bank** arrived.

I remember the sunlight catching his top hat just as he approached—dustless, perfect posture, his mustache meticulously curled. His black suit made him look like a shadow walking through a place of fire. I, in my work boots and green-tinted gloves, was as much a part of the desert as the mesquite and sand. He looked at me as if I were a relic. But he smiled politely.

“Young man,” he said, “how are you? We’ve come from the bank. We’ve come to inspect the arid desert. We’ve heard of your work here.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied with a nod, holding back a mixture of pride and caution. “This is the site of our pan resource collection. We track incoming imports, evaluate natural material, and provide sorting and fair wage structure for local labor. We also manage signature collection and resource records.”

He squinted. “Is there any usual device that you use to collect these... resources?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, leading him to a nearby bench covered in tools. “Standard provisions. We use mineral sorters, cyanide and prussic acid extraction for certain ores... And this.”

I showed him my journal. It was worn, corners curled from sweat and wind. Inside were notations, diagrams, names, coordinates, projections, and sketches of a strange machine.

“And what is this?” he asked, pointing to one of the more elaborate pages.

“That, sir, is my idea. A device. It’s inspired by this land—by what I’ve seen. It would collect data: water location, seismic shifts, nano-measures, even sky movements. A multi-dimensional calculator with applications in farming, trade, medical sciences... even spiritual reference. It could record signatures of the land itself.”

The man was silent. Then he looked me in the eye. “May I inspect it further?”

I felt hesitation—a pull in my chest. But I nodded. “Yes, sir. I trust the bank. I trust the value of your word. You may reference my name, my location, and the purpose of my invention.”

He smiled. “Very good, young man. We will return.”

That night, I stood under the stars, wind pulling at my shirt. I thought about what had just happened—how a simple act of positive thinking, of turning my days of exile into observation and creation, had now opened the possibility for real change.

And I whispered, “Oh, how abundant. Oh, how graceful the valley has been.”

For once, I didn’t feel forgotten. I felt **seen**.

From that day forward, the Arizona Calculator became more than an idea. It became **my purpose**.

I refined the concept. I designed the calculator to interpret **elements of the physical world**:

- Water channels
- Seismic movement
- Livestock motion
- Sky and star changes
- Soil mineral content
- Human migration
- Livelihood data

And not just data—but **beliefs, trust, signatures of intent**.

It would be compatible with fiber optics and future computations. It would measure and adapt to **nano-scale shifts**—a tool for both scientists and farmers, governments and exiles.

I sketched it layer by layer.

Magnets conducted signals. Control crystals altered readings. A **table key** allowed the user to map codes, weights, and environmental changes with astonishing clarity.

I built the first prototype using stone and scavenged wires from abandoned tech. The desert provided. Always had.

Time passed. The man from the bank returned. This time, with others.

They offered to record a trademark. To draft brand rights. They asked how I would apply the Calculator to public service. To farming. To education. To **freedom**.

I told them what I believed: That the Calculator would become a **currency of belief**. That it would empower others to see value in their own work. That by tracking what truly matters—not gold, not coin, but **trust and contribution**—we could create new systems.

Systems not bound by monarchs or empires. But by choice. By will. By data that reflected the truth of the land and the hands that shaped it.

And so it was that the **Arizona Calculator** was born—not from war, nor riches, nor royal decree. But from **positive thinking, good labor, and faith in an idea**.

I did not return to the courts of the King. I no longer bowed to crowns. I had, at last, found something better.

A tool to build with.

A way to give voice to the desert.

A legacy for a nation yet to be born.

They say now, when the desert breathes and the winds change direction, it is the Calculator adjusting its pulse—recording, remembering. When the fields shift and the cattle move, the sensors of the Arizona Calculator awaken and blink to life. When the waters rise or fall, when the stars shift overhead, the data travels through fiber and stone to places far beyond the sand.

And when people sign their name into the system—not in blood, but in **belief**—the land remembers:

We were here.

And we were free.

Saltlight and Signatures

By Jonathan Olvera

It was another salty afternoon on the wooden floors of the southwest territory. The wind was dry and the sun unforgiving, casting long shadows over the white-crust ed earth. The salt platforms shimmered, glowing like mirrors laid out by ancient hands. This was the kind of day where even time seemed to stop and think. A young man stood there, gazing across the basin. His name was Jonathan, though in whispered desert tongues they called him Aloe Vera. He had not always been free. Once, he had been chained in the belly of a ship—not for any crime, but for being an idea too dangerous to be free. The world around him was shaped by monarchs, empires, and spiritual conquest. Yet he escaped, fueled by a burning desire not only for personal autonomy but for the soul of a new people—an emerging nation not yet born, still being carved in sand, stone, and faith.

He journeyed through the lands, studying the structures of rule, bowing when necessary to learn how authority moved. He traded jewels and negotiated with tax collectors. He watched kings bleed peasants dry and swore to himself that he would never let a crown touch his soul. But when he suggested equality—when he dared to dream aloud—he was cast out, exiled to the desert. He did not perish. He built. Among stone, heat, and silence, Jonathan began to shape a voice. He forged rudimentary tools from scrap and silence, crafted devices to collect signatures—not for rebellion but for record. Not for blood, but for belief. And from those signatures came a kind of consensus, a new kind of currency. Loyalty measured in names. Faith measured in agreement. The Arizona Calculator, he called it. A device born not from ivory towers, but from toil and sunlight. It began as a way to track resource collection—gold, silver, luna, and Joe Rice, anything found in the land. But it grew into something greater. It recorded the movements of people, the rise of cattle, the passage of water and wind. It was a ledger of life, a conductor of order.

In this pre-industrial world, where monarchy still ruled and spiritual powers bent the hearts of empires, Jonathan became more than a worker. He became a founder. And yet he never stopped being a man of the people. One morning on the salt platform, Jonathan spoke with Charles, a man from Great Britain. They were discussing cattle, sacrifice, and the strange new crowds forming in the territory. “You eat meat?” Jonathan asked. “Yes, of course,” Charles replied. “Protein.” Jonathan nodded. “It could be a problem for us.” “I don’t see how. We do what we must.” “Oh goodness,” Jonathan sighed, half to himself. “Another day in the

sacrifice." He looked up toward the horizon. "What other blessings might be upon me?" "I guess I can see what you're saying, old man," Charles said with a grin. "I'm thankful for that," Jonathan said, and they both chuckled softly.

As the day passed, Jewish men arrived from distant lands, carrying gold, sharing politics, debating over wine and salt. Some of the settlers voiced disgust, others curiosity. "I can tell you," Jonathan said, "I pray every day. I make every effort to avoid mischief. Although it is a battle." A man from an island settlement nearby asked the crowd, "Is anybody offended by my comments?" "I'm just surprised," Jonathan replied. "The progress here—it's fast. Almost too fast." The sun dipped behind the jagged cliffs, and the dark cover of night wrapped the town like a blanket. Jonathan returned to his small wooden cabin. He had been quartered there as part of a settlement agreement, given a special wage and a little corner of peace. Inside, he found familiar faces—men from the shipyard, others who had traveled with him through dust and danger. "Got a cigarette?" Jonathan asked. One man nodded. "If you've got a bottle." Another laughed. "I drink the liquid." "I drink wine as well," Jonathan replied, smiling. "What is there to do today?" someone asked. "Drink a bottle, I suppose," said another, raising his hand. "If it's not too much worry to the men in green," Jonathan muttered. A few men from Great Britain shared the space, settling in for their shift the next day.

A woman peeked into the cabin, red scarf over her head. "God bless," she said softly. "And a greeting to recognize the night." The sheriff passed by slowly, tipping his hat. "All mischief and all effort—visible or not—must now wait for morning." Jonathan, never short on something to say, leaned forward. "Be patient," he whispered. "That's all we can do." Another neighbor pointed across the platform. "Do you know that person?" "It is what I owe to be," Jonathan said. "Honorable. Civil."

The moon hung round and white in the black sky. Someone on the porch called out, "Hey y'all! Let's head inside, come out early, find some work." The morning came with light cracking across the sky. The sun was a hammer of gold. "Good day to you all," Jonathan said, greeting the settlers. "How are you this morning?" "Terrible headache," said one man. "It's awful." "Thing is," Jonathan replied, "I have to travel soon. Got to check the elevation shifts with an explorer coming in from the east." "You mean the one from China?" "Yes. Has he arrived?" "He went back, I think. May be a while before he returns." "Well," Jonathan said, "let me know if you see him." He had his doubts about the day's work and considered staying in a different cabin. The town was still forming—twelve cabins on one side, twelve on the other, all leading to a game room.

Jonathan entered the saloon. Cards shuffled in the background. "I don't play much," he said to a nearby man. "Would you like to hear a story?" the man asked. "I've got jokes." Another whispered, "Do you like men or boys?" Jonathan responded with a dry smirk, "I like sacrifices." The man pointed at the coins on the table. "That's good. Because we have a king." Jonathan raised his hands. "Repent ye, repent ye. The kingdom of heaven is at hand." He placed a fair nickel and a dime on the bar and ordered a simple drink.

"What else is there to do?" he asked the bartender. The man shrugged. "The church is for children. The temple's for men." A woman in a red dress passed by, rolling her eyes. "I tried," she said. Another came from the bathroom, waving away the smell. "It stinks." Suddenly, the room fell quiet as the Pharisees entered. Dignitaries from Jerusalem, robed and sacred, holding scrolls and polished boxes, stepped inside, their sandals silent on wood. Jonathan whispered, "Oh my Jerusalem. I've been saved by an angel."

In the back of the saloon, a man in a green-striped suit was speaking softly into a microphone. "I'm listening," he said. "It's exhausting. I have a pounding headache. I've been cataloging everything—every item, every crate. I can't tell anymore if it's a dead girl or a goat. It smells terrible in the cattle stockpile." His assistant shuffled papers. "And this?" "That's a moonstone," he answered. "Put it down for appraisal."

The banker returned that evening, dressed in black as always, with his mustache perfect and his gloves immaculate. "Young man," he said to Jonathan, "I've come to see what you've made." Jonathan handed over a schematic drawn in charcoal and red pencil. "The Arizona Calculator," he said. "Now tracking water location, livestock movement, and seismic changes. There's even sensitivity for medical use." The banker examined it closely. "This is remarkable. You truly believe this can shape a society?" "I don't just believe," Jonathan said. "I know. It already has. We're building consensus. Not with force—but with belief. With numbers. With trust." The banker nodded. "We will send this to the capital. Perhaps even further."

Later that night, Jonathan stood on the salt platform under a deep blue sky. He looked out across the crowd gathering in the dark, lanterns in hand, eyes bright with hope. He held a parchment, worn and weathered from sun and sweat. "I did not come here to be another servant of the crown," he declared. "I bowed once to understand its weight. Now I rise to bear my own. We will not trade stones for survival forever. We will build a law that does not bleed the poor. We will sign—not in blood—but in belief. One name after another, until this desert remembers: we were here. And we were free."

In the stillness that followed, the people knew something had begun. Not just a city. Not just a ledger. But a nation—etched in salt and signatures. Jonathan, born under three empires, raised in the fire of exile, baptized in sweat and sand, had counted his blessings. Not just the good ones. But the bitter ones. The painful ones. The ones that taught. He had once been chained for dreaming too loudly. Now he had built a place where people were free to believe.

And in that saltlight, as the stars blinked overhead and the cattle lowered in the distance, Jonathan raised his hand and whispered into the wind, "Another day. Another blessing. Count them all."

Exile and Coin

By Jonathan Olvera

It was another salty afternoon, and our character, a young man, escaped from captivity aboard a ship to begin a journey to claim personal and national independence. The world shaped by monarchy, shifting empires, and spiritual colonization. His struggle becomes a blueprint for a new society, one forced through exile, labor, and faith. The sacrifice of cattle for food. The spilling of blood. And the death of cattle. And the coin that was to be traded to represent the new interest in America. And to place this young man in a pre-industrial world. Monarchy is ruled with absolute power, and spiritual movements reshape entire civilizations.

A young man breaks free from maritime captivity, filled by burning desire for autonomy, not only as an individual but on behalf of the emerging nation. He journeys across the land submitting to royal authority in order to study its inner workings and has pleasant conversations with other people who are also in the settlement. Serving under a complex market, he finds himself trading jewels and negotiating improvised systems of taxation. Learning to survive and resist within the confines of imperial order, his defiance is eventually met with exile to the desert.

In this harsh new environment, the exile must rebuild, laying stones, foraging structures, and forming new valleys under certain sand. Jonathan doesn't abandon his ideals. Instead, he crafts rudimentary tools and devices to collect signatures and create consensus, founding a currency of loyalty and belief among the people.

In a time before the Great War, the story unfolds alongside the expansion of the Mormon temple in early America and the rise of Chinese influence and the hybridization of English, Roman, French, and Native traditions. High between ancient Aztec memory, Catholic dominion, and Mormon theocracy, this tale explores how spiritual, political, and cultural forces blend to create new societal norms and how people find freedom, meaning, and survival under the shadow of an empire involving slavery.

Jonathan, also known as Oliver, in whispered desert tongues, is a child of three empires, born under the shadow of English order, shaped by Roman discipline, and stirred by the mystic fervor of Spanish-Nazarene devotion. He is a man of labor rebellion. He begins his life in chains, held in the underbelly of a ship. Not as a criminal, but as an idea too dangerous to be free. His heart yearns for something larger than survival.

From the very beginning, he seeks not only to liberate himself, but to write into earth a new name for the people, a nation without masters, not only by justice and sacred duty. Training in the custom of kings and courts, he bows when necessary and trades like a man. Twice his age, offering jewels for peace, fairness, favor, yet in his mind remains encaged.

When exiled to a desert for daring to suggest equality, he does not perish; he builds. Among stone, heat, and silence, Jonathan finds voice. He collects the wills of the people, signatures not for petitions but for prophecy. His following grows not from war cries but from the quiet dignity of those who labor with hope. He is a mirror of ancient prophets and modern founders, a mandatory between all world dominion and the future's freedom.

Jonathan says to himself, *I did not come here to be another servant of the crown. I bowed once to understand its weight. Now I write and spare my own. Will not trade stones for survival forever. We will build a law that does not bleed the poor. We will sign not in the blood. Relief.* One aim after another until this desert remembers. *We were here. We were free.*

Another day on the salt platforms. Wooden floors in the Southwest Territory. Jonathan starts his day in a conversation with another person in the settlement. They were debating about sacrifice and livestock and the new crowds in the Southwest Territory. He was talking with another man from Great Britain.

Jonathan was saying, *"You eat meat."*

The man answered, *"Yes, as a source of protein."*

Jonathan said, in his political debates, *"Could it be a problem for us?"*

The other man answered, *"I don't see what could be the problem if it is what has to be done today."*

Jonathan replied, *"Oh goodness, just another day in this sacrifice. What other blessings might be upon me?"*

The man replied, *"I guess I can see what you are saying, old man."*

Jonathan responded cleverly, *"I am thankful for that."*

Again he said, *"Well, it looks like there might be a new flow of people that might come into the territory and it might not be too bad if everything goes well and there's not too many riots or disagreements."*

As the day progressed, the Jewish men from lands far away came in with gold and jewels and discussed their new politics. The crowd commented, *"I'm disgusted with the whole assembly."* Others pitched in the idea to gather.

Jonathan said, *"I can tell you, I pray every day."* He also mentioned, *"I make every effort to avoid mischief. Although it is a battle."*

Another man was a peacemaker for an island settlement afar. He asked, *"Is anybody offended by my comments?"*

Jonathan responded, *"I am just surprised at the progress at the location. It is very quick."*

And so, the day quickly ended and the sun was covered with a dark cover of night.

At night, Jonathan went back to his cabin where he was quartered and given a special provision of wage to locate into the settlement. He looked around and he saw a group of people that he was familiar with from the shipyard and the work of it and other travelers.

He asked, *"Person, give me a cigarette if you don't mind, to assist me?"*

The other man said, *"I need a bottle of liquor."*

His partner said, *"I drink the liquid."*

Jonathan responded, *"I drink wine as well."*

They responded, *"What is there to do today? Then we'll have a bottle of liquor."*

Jonathan replied, *"If it's not too much of a worry to men dressed in green."*

A third man, British from Great Britain, was there to work. He was feeling now more comfortable with the idea.

One of them said, *"I can't see myself doing anything like that."*

Another said, *"That's right."*

A woman, looking into the quarters where Aloe Vera or Jonathan was quartering, said, *"God bless."*

The sheriff, who was just passing by, said, *"All the mischief and our visible efforts to continue."*

Jonathan was very excited, almost something to say all the time. And he said, *"Be patient."*

Another neighbor on another platform said, *"Do you know that person?"*

He replied, *"Well, it is what I owe to be honored, honorable, to be civil."*

The moon hung high in the sky, round and white.

"Hey, y'all. Decided to head inside. And to come out early. And to look for work."

When the morning came and the sun broke the darkness, he said, *"Good morning."*

John said, *"Good day to you. How are all of you?"*

Another man said, *"I have a terrible headache. And it's awful."*

Jonathan commented, *"Thing is now I have to travel to view from the elevation changes. I have a job to do here with an explorer who is coming from a land far away. Does anybody know where the man from the cabin is this location?"*

They responded, *"Who?"*

He said, *"The new explorer. I was told everybody would know who he was."*

A man insisted, *"Oh yes, he went to China."*

Jonathan asked, *"Would he be long?"*

The town replied, *"I can forget, but I'll keep in mind that you're looking for the man and I'll call you when I see."*

Jonathan thought there might be work that was cancelled for the day and he might have to head into another cabin because the town was being established.

There was a line of cabins going 12 buildings on one side and 12 across the road into a local game room.

Johnson said, *"I don't play cards too much."*

He walked inside and created a town full of men. Another man in the background said, *"Would you like to hear a story? I have a couple jokes. Do you like men or do you like boys?"*

Jonathan, in his politics, replied, *"I... I like sacrifices."*

The man replied, pointing out the appointments, the prudence of the young man.

He said, *"That is good because we have a king..."*

John replied, *"Repent ye, repent ye, the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

He went to the table, spared a dime and a fair nickel to entreat himself to a nice drink of alcohol.

He asked the bartender, *"What else is there to do?"*

The man replied, *"The church is for children, the temple is for men."*

A woman in a red dress and also a game attendant at the bar said out loud, *"Oh, I tried."*

Another woman coming from the bathroom to accompany her said, *"It stinks."*

The Pharisees from Jerusalem, Israel, were there on political business on the acquisition of the estate and the actual log cabins with the foundations of the settlement. They walked in bearing their sacred items.

Jonathan exclaimed, *"Oh my Jerusalem, I've been saved by an angel this company!"*

Meanwhile, another man, close by in a green and striped suit, an attendant of the establishment, was talking using a device and microphone. He said, *"I am listening. It is exhausting. I have a pounding headache going through the entire location and cataloging everything making every detail perfect."*

He mentioned to the microphone, *"Sometimes it's hard to tell what to do, to differentiate, when the question is, is that a dead girl or is that a goat going through the cattle and the cows and the pigs? Oh my, that smells terrible."*

She was looking at his index inventory and paperwork involving slavery.

Jonathan, while in the game room and having a time in the new settlement—which consisted of rows of wedding cabins, 12 across one street and 12 across the other—witnessed the town making a proclamation. There were cowboys and merchants, doctors, shaman workers or politicians, and many colors of clothing: red, blue. Drinks were served, games were being played.

One of them exclaimed, *"We have a king!"*

A preacher in the game room, having a good time, said to all, *"Repent ye. Repent ye. The kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

A person by the bar, having drinks, asked, *"What else is there to do?"*

A man mentioned churches for children. Another man, observing politics, said, *"Temple is for men."* A very devout Christian man tried in the background to influence another belief.

Another man at the bar, serving drinks, commented, *"My Jerusalem,"* as a Pharisee promoting new religion in the area came, followed by a man with a pale complexion. The crowd murmured, *"Could they be coming in from another place?"* Others said they might be short losers at the local sports centers.

Jonathan cried out, *"Let me be your leader."*

The others exclaimed, *"Oh, that looks nice."*

The temple politicians came from across the way. They were questioned, asked questions, and made comments like, *"Is that a new order?"* Others wondered, exclaimed, *"Is that sanitation?"*

The merchant at the location made a post to create a stall to lobby his own cause. He said, *"I am listening."*

A nearby man said, *"Oh, I surrender my will to the guardian angels."*

Jonathan replied, *"That's getting away with it."*

The manager of the bar came into the place and reported, *"He needed to consult the sheriff. What's going on here? Is that prostitution?"*

The leader of the group asked the manager, *"Did I give you money?"*

It became an argument. The leader asked, *"Do you need more money?"* And they joked, *"Show me justice."*

The man leading the group of women said, *"It is a service."*

The manager replied, *"I've had a good one."*

Jonathan mentioned to the crowd of good-looking women, *"I've made my money pending at this location. I don't sell everyone."*

The man replied, *"Is that really important?"*

Jonathan said, *"It's what I am doing right now."*

The man leading the group said, *"Bless you. What is the common order in this place?"*

Jonathan replied, *"It is a service to the groups in the area that are to the cabins. They are serviced separately."*

The man asked, *"Do they recognize the steel import?"*

Jonathan replied, *"Well, what a sight. Almost saying, of course."*

He asked, *"Who takes a look around here?"*

Jonathan said, *"Almost everybody does their share of work in the steel import. It's very important so that we use lumber."*

Jonathan said, *"Some work is better than none. I see potential in this place; there may be lots of steel that I may acquire here to build a solid foundation for large construction."*

Isaiah and Jonathan replied, *"We have heard of you. This is the desolation where the sun does shine so bright that it is properly assessed as destitution."*

The man replied, *"That's a long story."*

He sat down at the bar and prepared to take a drink from the attendant with nickels, dimes, and quarters of note, avoiding large notes without making a good conversation.

"Why, that's a big bag of politics you carry around with you," said Jonathan.

He replied, *"Well, that's what I plan to do. I plan to do politics here, and I plan to leave my man here with women. They're going to be called the Nephites, and I wish that they'd be elected and recognized."*

Jonathan said, *"That's fine. That's a fine idea. It might take some work for the people to become accepted. People are very wary of what they trust and how they breathe."*

The man replied, *"Well, me and my woman, we have some plates, and we have ideas for this place about how to make it work. Everyone, I'll take my own share."*

Jonathan replied, *"This is commonplace."*

Jonathan asked him, *"Are you a fair man?"*

He replied, *"I am not corrupt."*

Jonathan asked again, *"Does your system function? I was working on something similar. Whose idea was that?"*

Jonathan said, *"It was my own."*

The other man said jokingly, *"Don't worry, that's gonna end."*

Jonathan said, *"That's terrible. What could these dogs, these hungry dogs, be looking for?"*

The man waved him off. Jonathan went to speak. Another man nearby heard the loud conversation and said, *"I heard that Nephi is the same as the dog."*

Jonathan said, *"They must be hungry. What do you think they really want?"*

The man answered, *"My guess is acknowledgment."*

Jonathan replied, *"It's a new idea to use the language and work to put together a trade dollar. What do you think if I follow the same? With my name on it and all my effort?"*

The man said jokingly, *"I don't even know you."*

Jonathan said, *"I said, it's Pope."*

He replied, *"Whatever it is, I can't wait for you to get to it."*

Jonathan replied, *"Tempt me. I'll give you a nickel and a dime and a couple of spare coins to give you."*

He reached into his pocket and pulled out coins to buy a drink for the man. He moved around the room, making conversation with people politely but kind of loud since it was an alcohol-fueled environment.

Jonathan said to himself, *"The import-export, oh, so cruel. Everything sells at an auction."*

A man pointed at him: *"Look over there. It's Nephi, the visitor. He's just like you."*

Jonathan asked, *"Is that sure? Where I came from, we weren't allowed to move too much or do anything suspicious. They were caught trying to make a religion. They came here. Now they're allowed to. And what offense would this be?"*

He answered jokingly, *"The creation of a false prophet. Fake Pharisee."*

Jonathan replied jokingly, *"How is that supposed to bless my food?"*

The man answered, *"If I was caught being a fake Pharisee, I want to kill myself."*

Jonathan said, *"I don't know much about all that, but I've been successful here myself. What is with this whole crowd here? Is it political?"*

The man said, *"There ain't much honey and there ain't much garlic here. I like their money though. I like it going to the bank."*

Jonathan told him, *"That sounds like a good arrangement. Either they keep their word, there's plenty of grubs and plenty of worms. When the sun comes up and the darkness does cover the blazing sun, what will the moon bring to the table? It could include a couple of fraudsters."*

A woman came up behind them in the trash and exclaimed, *"I'm excited."*

Jonathan agreed, *"I'm very excited."*

The next day, Jonathan said, *"Hot, hot, hot, my head is hot."* He had a drink and left the game room, which was adjacent to a saloon, a post office, and local banks for lumber and grain. He was fetching water from a faucet as he was drinking.

He said to himself, *"All this water is making me heavy."*

As a woman woke up, he said, *"I put a wet towel on my head and I need medication."*

In the distance, there was a loud noise of presses—mechanical presses, cyanide, acid, and the banging of hammers. The attendant who had spent the night with them asked, *"What is that noise?"*

Jonathan said, *"I don't like to swear, and I'm not going to be too specific, but it's hard work."*

In the background, the woman said, *"It is a sacrifice. Have you seen it done before?"*

Jonathan said, *"No. Not really."*

He left. Jonathan replied to the woman, *"I like the smell."*

She said, *"I like cigarettes."*

Jonathan said, *"It would make me feel better if you were a little more interested in that cloud in the distance and when it's time to get to work."*

She said, *"Why would I tell you about work?"*

He said, *"Be polite."*

She said, *"I'm not sure exactly what you're talking about."*

Jonathan said, *"As a last wish."*

She asked, *"How does it look, this order in this play?"*

She said, *"There's very much to do. There is theater to be done. There is sacrifice. There is the responsibility of teaching children."*

Jonathan said, *"That's what I like to do."*

She said, *"Oh, really?"*

He said, *"Excuse me again. I've got to go check the train and see if there's any work to do. See if there are any big orders."*

He said, *"Might get caught up in too much work. Might come across a slave, a monkey, a gorilla, a gorilla slave, or a slave monkey."*

He said, *"I'm joking."*

She said, *"I don't like to think about that."*

Jonathan said, *"Well, this is exile."*

She said, *"I'm gonna sit right here and wait for you to get back."*

He said, *"Very nice. That's very nice."*

And he went off to look for work.

The woman was back at the quarters and she was thinking, *"Why should I be responsible? Somebody help me. Oh my goodness. The weather is very hot."*

The woman knew the vocabulary and repeated to herself, *"Ill repute, not that resourceful, lucky."*

She asked aloud, *"Is there something bothering you?"*

She said, *"I prefer to use yourself."*

So it's a very familiar story in the Southwest. The use of cyanide and acid made exposure to the chemicals, and people acted very funny.

"You've got mail. I do become excited easily," she said to herself. *"It was very hot."*

Jonathan had just arrived at the job location. He was having a conversation with the man at the labor booth and continued, *"Observing my resource mechanically, I would make myself available to work here today."*

He said, *"That's very nice. Good day to you."*

After the conversation, he told the man, *"My friend, I am as simple as the man. That's next. I didn't mean to bother you."*

Before he remembered to dismiss him, he told, *"I have a list of chores in the quarry for you to do."*

He said, *"It's not convenient to call this an occupation."*

Jonathan said, *"I'm only a human. I'm not a machine or a robot. I'll be willing to do them."*

The man continued, *"The important location is working on science."*

Jonathan said, *"That sounds very interesting. To work here in the new design, I'm very excited to tell you we'll have time to discuss our science and our method."*

Things aren't always visible or obvious. No one likes to lose, and no one looks like a fool."

The work involves medicine and practice. *"I'm very glad that you take the time to pay attention because it's going to be important later on. In this line of work, you will come across the use of obscenities and profanities. You will have to work alongside riots and corruptions. Be foolish to get lost in other activities that can erase your time and resources,"* Jonathan said.

He added jokingly, *"Say, have I explained enough for you? Because I could do it again."*

The man said, *"No sir, at all. I really understand. It's work. I'll be here for you."*

Jonathan said, *"I would love to come and continue this conversation if that's what you'd like me to do."*

He said jokingly, *"The shortcomings of humanity, the hunger and pain."*

The man finished, *"The nature of being a dog. Let every day be the same."*

Jonathan told the man, *"If I'm not here, I'll be out gathering stones along the roads of the Roman Empire."*

The man asked, *"Is that all you do?"*

Jonathan said, *"I'm good at gathering stones for whatever is necessary. It's a long walk from the cobblestone path."*

The man finished, *"It's necessary to get a day's work."*

They parted ways and then came across another man who said, *"Young man, how are you?"*

Jonathan replied, *"I'm doing okay, I'm doing good."*

He asked, *"Did you just come from that booth over there?"*

Jonathan replied, *"It's a long story."*

The man asked, *"Are you familiar with the rules of the coin? Would you like to work around here?"*

Jonathan replied, *"I will work with you. If you don't mind, I will need to instruct you and give directives on the work site. Although I've heard you talk before, it's not your first day. I need you to go fetch water, that way you can find water and bring it to me."*

Jonathan said, *"It's getting dark. Would you mind if I came by and worked again with you tomorrow?"*

The man said, *"You might be right. I can go talk to the man from the quarry or the man from the post. It's a long way back out to the street."*

Jonathan replied, *"Even if it will be my first day, I can become familiar with your quarry. I'll make sure to make some coffee in the morning."*

Jonathan said, *"It's an excellent choice to make a company."*

The man said, *"We'll be quick. This will be the most satisfying for me."*

Jonathan said, *"Coffee in the morning is how I'll wake up, and I'll keep some in the bag."*

"Yes, sir, that's what I do," he said.

The next morning, Jonathan rose early. He brewed the coffee he promised, the aroma filling the cabin quarters. He carried the steaming cup outside, where the sun was already casting long, gold shadows across the desert platform.

He said aloud, *"Good morning, world. Let's see what work awaits today."*

A man from the settlement, carrying tools for the quarry, nodded. *"Morning, Jonathan. You ready for another day in the sun?"*

Jonathan replied, *"As ready as the stones themselves."*

The man laughed and said, *"That's the spirit. We've got a lot to do. The new buildings aren't going to erect themselves."*

Jonathan walked toward the quarry, water bucket in hand. He noted the arrangement of cabins—twelve across each side of the street. He muttered, *"Order in the chaos. Twelve by twelve, just like life."*

A woman appeared from one of the cabins, wiping her brow. *"Jonathan! Are you heading to the quarry already?"*

He nodded. *"Yes. Coffee first, water second. Stones are the third. And work is the fourth. There's no escape from the day."*

She laughed, *"You make it sound noble."*

Jonathan replied, *"Everything noble comes with sweat and dust."*

At the quarry, he found a line of men already at work. One of them asked, *"Did you bring the tools?"*

Jonathan pulled a small satchel from his shoulder. *"All accounted for. Picks, shovels, chisels. Even the spare ropes."*

Another man, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, nodded. *"Good. We'll need everything today. The desert doesn't forgive laziness."*

Jonathan began measuring the area, inspecting the stones. He said to himself, *"Precision is survival. The empire may fall, but a wall laid straight holds forever."*

He glanced at a younger man, struggling with a hammer. *"Let me help. Watch the swing. Not too wide, not too high. Control."*

The young man responded, *"Yes, Jonathan. Thank you."*

Jonathan said, *"No thanks needed. We build together. Or not at all."*

As the morning passed, a merchant arrived with carts of steel and lumber. He greeted Jonathan. *"We bring supplies for the foundation. You'll need this."*

Jonathan replied, *"Much appreciated. Every piece counts."*

The merchant commented, *"I hear you're starting a coin project too. Using your name for trade?"*

Jonathan smiled slightly. *"Yes. Small beginnings. Every empire starts with an idea and a signature."*

The merchant nodded. *"Clever. People will follow that."*

Nearby, a boy shouted, *"Jonathan! Look at this!"*

He approached and saw a newly laid stone, perfectly aligned. Jonathan said, *"Well done. Each stone is a word in our story. Remember that."*

The man in the wide-brimmed hat nodded approvingly. *"You teach well, Jonathan. Not just labor, but vision."*

Jonathan replied, *"Vision is built one stone at a time, as is freedom. We teach with action, not only words."*

As noon approached, the sun blazed overhead. Jonathan wiped his brow and muttered, *"Salt in the air, fire in the sky. And yet, we endure."*

A woman carrying water called out, *"Jonathan, rest and drink!"*

He nodded, taking a sip. *"Grateful. Every drop is precious."*

Another man, surveying the work, asked, *"Do you think the town will recognize our efforts?"*

Jonathan replied, *"Recognition is secondary. What matters is the foundation we lay. Walls, stones, laws, and hearts alike."*

A loud noise came from the blacksmith's corner—hammering metal against metal. Jonathan smiled. *"The sound of progress. And sacrifice."*

He paused, looking at the horizon. *"Every day, we carve a name in the desert. Every stone, every coin, every signature. This is how freedom grows."*

By evening, the group gathered under the shade of a sparse tree. Jonathan said, *"Rest now. Tomorrow, the labor continues. But remember—what we build is more than stone. It is promise."*

The men nodded, some drinking from flasks, others simply leaning back in the dust.

Jonathan reflected quietly, *"Exile is no longer punishment. It is preparation. For laws that do not bleed, for coins that carry belief, for a nation that remembers us not as servants, but as free people."*

Night fell, the moon rising round and white above the cabins. Jonathan murmured to himself, *"We were here. We were free. And tomorrow, we build again."*

The next morning, Jonathan awoke to the first light creeping over the Southwest Territory. The desert air was already heavy with heat. He rubbed his eyes and muttered, *"Hot, hot, hot. But work calls before the sun fully rises."*

He brewed a fresh pot of coffee and carried it outside, where a few early risers were already moving about. One man called, *"Jonathan! You're up early again!"*

Jonathan smiled. *"Morning. The stones won't wait, and neither will the empire in our minds."*

A young woman passed by carrying a bucket of water. She asked, *"Are you heading to the quarry now?"*

Jonathan nodded. *"Yes. Water first, stones second, labor third, conversation fourth. And maybe reflection fifth."*

She laughed lightly. *"You make a schedule of freedom, I see."*

Jonathan replied, *"Freedom requires discipline, just as walls require stones."*

At the quarry, the men were already at work. A man in a leather vest called, *"Jonathan, we need help with the eastern corner. The stones aren't aligning properly."*

Jonathan approached, examining the placement. *"Not too high, not too low. Keep the angles true. A crooked wall teaches nothing except regret."*

Another worker, hammer in hand, looked up. *"Yes, sir. I'll adjust it."*

Jonathan nodded approvingly. *"Good. Each stone is more than labor—it is a word, a promise, a testament."*

Nearby, a merchant arrived with a wagon full of steel beams. He called, *"Jonathan, these are for the next section of the foundation. You'll need them."*

Jonathan replied, *"Every piece counts. Thank you. The desert remembers every contribution."*

The young boy from the previous day shouted again, *"Jonathan! Look at this!"*

Jonathan came over and saw the stone aligned perfectly. *"Well done. Each piece builds not only a wall but a story. Remember that. One stone, one signature, one coin at a time."*

A man in a wide-brimmed hat surveyed the progress and said, *"Jonathan, your teachings go beyond labor. You give vision to these hands."*

Jonathan replied, *"Vision is built, not taught. A wall straight and true is a lesson in persistence, patience, and freedom."*

The sun rose higher, burning the backs of the men and the dust of the desert. Jonathan paused and took a sip from his water flask. *"Every drop is precious. Every breath, earned."*

A woman carrying a tray of food approached. *"Jonathan, you should eat. You've been working too hard."*

He nodded gratefully. *"Thank you. Sacrifice is easier when shared."*

A man overseeing the lumber called, *"Jonathan, the steel from the merchant is ready to be lifted. Can you coordinate?"*

Jonathan directed the men. *"Lift carefully, align perfectly. Every beam, every stone, carries weight beyond itself. Treat it with respect."*

As noon approached, a group of travelers arrived, curious about the settlement. One man asked, *"Is this where Jonathan works? We heard tales of a new order, a new coin?"*

Jonathan replied, *"Yes. Foundations are laid with stone and belief alike. Stay, observe, learn."*

The travelers murmured among themselves. A young woman asked, *"Will this coin really hold value?"*

Jonathan smiled. *"Value comes not from metal alone but from trust, labor, and vision. That is what we build here."*

A loud banging echoed from the blacksmith's forge. Jonathan muttered, *"Progress. Sacrifice. Civilization in motion."*

By evening, the men gathered in the shade of a sparse tree near the quarry. Jonathan said, *"Rest now. Tomorrow, labor continues. But remember, each stone, each signature, each coin, tells our story. Exile is no longer punishment—it is preparation."*

A man carrying a bucket of water nodded. *"You always see more than labor, Jonathan."*

Jonathan replied, *"Because labor is the language of freedom. And this desert will remember us—not as servants, but as builders of something larger than ourselves."*

Night fell. The moon rose full and white over the cabins. Jonathan whispered to himself, *"We were here. We were free. And tomorrow, we build again."*

That night, Jonathan returned to the settlement's game room, adjacent to the saloon and post office. The room was alive with conversation, the clink of coins, and the scent of tobacco. A man in a green-striped vest waved from the far corner, calling, *"Jonathan! Come sit. You look weary."*

Jonathan nodded and approached. *"Evening. The stones demand attention, but conversation feeds the mind."*

A woman in a red dress poured drinks at the bar. *"You work too hard, Jonathan. You need a drink."*

He smiled politely. *"Perhaps, but one cannot trade stones for forgetfulness."*

A man nearby, pale and clean-shaven, whispered, *"Is that the man who talks of new coins and new laws?"*

Jonathan overheard and said softly, *"Yes, and every word is measured, every action deliberate."*

Another man, leaning on a table, said jokingly, *"Do you like men or boys, Jonathan?"*

Jonathan replied, *"I like sacrifices, and the work that accompanies them."*

The man laughed. *"Good answer. We have a king, after all."*

Jonathan, leaning on the table, added, *"Repent ye, repent ye—the kingdom of heaven is at hand. But even kingdoms must bend to justice."*

The bartender, polishing glasses, interjected, *"Temple is for men. Church is for children."*

A new voice came from behind—a visitor in pale robes, murmuring, *"Oh, Jerusalem, saved by an angel!"*

Jonathan turned. *"Welcome. Every new face is a potential ally in the work of freedom."*

A merchant standing near the door announced, *"I am opening a stall for steel and lumber. Contributions to the settlement are welcome."*

Jonathan nodded. *"Some work is better than none. Each effort builds not just the town but the law that will govern it."*

Nearby, a man whispered, *"Nephi is here. Like you, Jonathan."*

Jonathan said aloud, *"If they are hungry, let us feed them—not just with food, but with purpose and understanding. Coins, stones, and labor—these are our tools of freedom."*

A woman from the back of the room exclaimed, *"I'm excited!"*

Jonathan replied, *"So am I. Excitement is the fuel of creation."*

As the night deepened, the crowd began discussing politics, trade, and the coming influx of settlers. Jonathan moved among them, quietly observing and guiding.

A man asked, *"Will your coin hold value?"*

Jonathan answered, *"Value comes not from metal alone but from trust, labor, and shared vision. That is the currency of a free people."*

Another man, pouring a drink, joked, *"What about the dogs outside?"*

Jonathan laughed softly. *"They seek acknowledgment, just as we do. Every creature participates in the order of things."*

The bartender handed Jonathan a small coin. *"For your efforts."*

Jonathan took it and said, *"Each coin is a promise, a signature in stone and in deed. Let it remind us why we labor and why we build."*

The men around the tables nodded, raising their drinks. The settlement hummed with life, even in exile.

Outside, the moon hung high, silver and constant. Jonathan whispered to himself, *"Exile is no longer punishment—it is preparation. We were here. We were free. And tomorrow, we build again."*

The next morning, Jonathan rose with the sun breaking across the desert. The heat was already pressing against his skin. He walked to the faucet near the post office to fetch water. *"All this water makes me heavy,"* he muttered to himself, shaking the bucket.

A woman from the settlement appeared, holding a wet towel. *"You need this for your head. You look overheated."*

Jonathan took it and pressed it to his forehead. *"Thank you. The desert is relentless, and so are its lessons."*

In the distance, the mechanical pounding of presses, hammers, and clanging metals filled the air. *"What is that noise?"* she asked.

Jonathan shrugged. *"Hard work. The sound of building, of survival. Not all who labor see the purpose immediately."*

She looked toward the smoke and dust. *"It is sacrifice, isn't it?"*

Jonathan nodded. *"Yes, but also growth. Every effort leaves its mark on this land."*

He walked toward the quarry where men were arranging stones for foundations. A labor foreman called, *"Jonathan, ready to begin?"*

"Always," Jonathan replied. *"I am here to observe, to assist, and to learn."*

The foreman handed him a list of chores. *"Fetch water, move stones, organize materials. The work is necessary, but not endless. Keep your mind with it."*

Jonathan accepted the list. *"I am human, not a machine. But willing, always willing."*

Another man, leaning on a shovel, said, *"You have a mind for politics as well as labor. Be careful not to lose focus."*

Jonathan smiled. *"Politics and labor are the same. One builds the mind; the other builds the world. Both require patience and precision."*

As he moved along the line of men, he collected stones, organized timber, and discussed plans for a new coin system with a small group nearby.

"Do you understand the rules of the coin?" a man asked.

"Yes," Jonathan said. *"Each coin is not just currency—it is a record of trust, work, and loyalty. Each effort, each signature, each stone contributes to its value."*

Another laborer laughed. *"And what of the dogs outside?"*

Jonathan chuckled. *"They seek acknowledgment, like us all. Give them a morsel, and they follow. Give them purpose, and they guide."*

By midday, the sun was high, oppressive. Jonathan wiped sweat from his brow and surveyed the settlement. Cabins lined the streets, twelve across, twelve across the other. Merchants, cowboys, laborers, and travelers moved among them. The air smelled of dust, metal, and sweat, punctuated with the occasional scent of cooked meat.

A woman carrying supplies stopped him. *"Jonathan, what drives you? Why all this effort?"*

"Because the desert teaches patience and perseverance. Every stone, every coin, every signature builds a nation, even before kings arrive."

Nearby, a young man from Great Britain called, *"Jonathan, you think the new settlers will adapt quickly?"*

"They will," Jonathan replied. *"As long as we guide them. As long as we show that labor and trust shape freedom more than fear ever could."*

The sound of a bell signaled midday. The workers paused. Jonathan collected his thoughts. *"Rest briefly,"* he said. *"Drink water, eat if you must, but remember: our work is not just for today—it is for tomorrow, for the coin, for the people who will follow us."*

He walked to a shaded corner, leaning against a stone wall. He spoke softly to himself, *"Exile is not punishment. It is preparation. Each day, each labor, each conversation, teaches me how to guide, how to build, and how to remain free even under the weight of empire."*

From the distance, the sound of hammers resumed. Jonathan returned to the line, ready to continue. A man beside him said, *"Jonathan, your dedication inspires the rest. How do you remain so steady?"*

Jonathan smiled. *"I am human. I am tired. But I see the horizon, and it calls me—not just for me, but for all who labor beside me. That is steadiness."*

By sunset, the day's work was done. Stones arranged, coins counted, plans for trade drafted. Jonathan stood at the edge of the settlement, watching the desert glow gold and red. He whispered, *"Tomorrow, we continue. Another day, another signature, another stone, another coin. The desert will remember that we were here. And we were free."*

The next morning, Jonathan woke with the sun casting long orange shadows across the sand. The air was already thick with heat. He made his way to the center of the settlement, where a small crowd had gathered near the trading post.

A caravan of travelers had arrived from distant lands—merchants from China, traders from the Caribbean, and a group of Jewish merchants carrying gold and jewels. The crowd murmured, curious and cautious.

Jonathan approached one of the traders, a tall man with a pale complexion and a leather satchel. *"Good morning. I am Jonathan. Are you here to trade?"*

The trader nodded. *"Yes. We bring jewels, spices, and ideas from afar. What do you offer in exchange?"*

Jonathan held up a handful of newly minted coins. *"These are trade coins of loyalty and labor. Each represents a day of work, a signature of agreement, and a stone laid for the foundation of this settlement."*

The trader raised an eyebrow. *"A coin for work? Tell me more."*

Jonathan smiled. *"It is not mere currency. It is proof that we are building something greater than ourselves. That every laborer, every mason, every thinker contributes to the freedom of the people and the stability of our community."*

A nearby man from Great Britain leaned forward. *"You make it sound noble, Jonathan. But will the travelers accept it?"*

"We shall see," Jonathan replied. *"We present it with honesty, with explanation, and with trust. Those who understand labor and dedication will recognize its value."*

The Jewish merchants inspected the coins, turning them in their hands. *"Interesting,"* one said. *"A coin that carries more than metal. It carries story, effort, and agreement."*

Jonathan nodded. *"Exactly. And for each coin you accept, you are not just trading goods—you are participating in the creation of a new order, one that remembers the labor and loyalty of every hand involved."*

A merchant from the Caribbean added, *"And what of disputes? What if someone refuses the coin or breaks agreement?"*

Jonathan gestured toward the settlement. *"We rely on signatures, witness, and community memory. The desert watches, and so do the people. Dishonor is visible, and trust once broken is hard to restore. But when honored, it strengthens the bonds of everyone here."*

A woman in a red dress, observing from the edge of the crowd, asked, *"And if someone wants to join your settlement? Learn your ways?"*

Jonathan smiled. *"They are welcome. They must work, contribute, and learn. They must understand that freedom comes not from the absence of authority, but from the discipline to create and uphold law, fairness, and justice together."*

The day progressed with conversations, trades, and agreements. Stones were laid for new cabins, coins exchanged for jewels and spices, and Jonathan walked among the workers, smiling at the diligence and curiosity of the settlers.

"Jonathan," a young man asked, *"how do you remain so patient with all these negotiations?"*

Jonathan paused, brushing sweat from his brow. *"Patience is learned in exile. Every stone, every coin, every conversation is practice. The desert teaches us that haste creates ruin. We must be steady, deliberate, and thoughtful."*

By afternoon, the settlement was alive with motion. Merchants discussed trade routes, travelers shared stories of distant lands, and children watched in wonder as the coin system took shape.

A British laborer, observing Jonathan, asked quietly, *"Do you think this coin system will endure?"*

Jonathan looked out across the rows of cabins, the settlers at work, and the desert beyond. *"It will endure as long as we remember why we created it: not for profit, not for power, but for trust, labor, and freedom. Every coin carries that memory, and every signature strengthens it."*

As the sun dipped toward the horizon, Jonathan gathered the traders and workers together. *"Tomorrow,"* he said, *"we continue to build. We continue to trade. We continue to lay the stones, collect the coins, and remember that our work is not just for today—it is for the people who will follow, and for the freedom that will endure long after we are gone."*

The traders nodded, understanding the weight of his words. The settlers returned to their work with renewed vigor, and Jonathan walked through the rows of cabins, observing the settlement he was shaping, feeling the pulse of a new order forming in the desert, one coin, one stone, one signature at a time.

The next morning, the settlement awoke to a tense atmosphere. Word had spread that one of the traveling merchants refused Jonathan's coins, claiming they held no value outside the settlement.

Jonathan met the merchant near the trading post. *"Good morning. I hear you have concerns about our coins?"*

The merchant, a stout man from the Caribbean, crossed his arms. *"I do. Metal alone cannot buy spices or jewels elsewhere. Why should I accept this?"*

Jonathan smiled patiently. *"Because it is more than metal. Each coin represents labor, loyalty, and agreement. It is proof that every hand, every mind contributes to the settlement. It carries the weight of trust."*

The merchant snorted. *"Trust does not fill my satchel with spices."*

A British laborer nearby spoke up. *"Jonathan, perhaps you should explain the redemption process again. He may not understand."*

Jonathan turned to the merchant. *"Very well. Each coin can be exchanged within the settlement for goods, labor, or services. You may also trade them with others who recognize our system. It is a network of value, built on honesty and diligence. Those who honor it prosper. Those who ignore it, lose trust and opportunity."*

The merchant frowned. *"And if I refuse? What then?"*

Jonathan gestured toward the growing settlement. *"Then you remain outside the network. You may trade elsewhere, but here, you will have no standing. Others will choose to work with those who honor the agreement. That is the law of trust in our desert."*

A woman from the settlement, her voice sharp and clear, spoke from the edge of the crowd. *"Jonathan, you risk alienating important traders. They may leave entirely."*

Jonathan nodded. *"Perhaps. But I will not compromise the integrity of the system for fear of discomfort. Freedom and trust must be earned and respected. If we bend for fear, we lose the foundation of what we are building."*

The merchant muttered under his breath but took a coin reluctantly. *"I will try it. But if this fails, I am gone."*

Jonathan smiled, placing a hand on the man's shoulder. *"Then you will have witnessed how labor and loyalty can create value where there was none before."*

The British laborer whispered to Jonathan. *"Do you think he will understand?"*

Jonathan watched as the merchant walked toward the trading post, examining the coins in his hand. *"In time, perhaps. Some lessons are learned slowly. Others must witness the proof themselves."*

Later that afternoon, a group of settlers gathered to discuss how to handle disputes over the coin system.

"We cannot force anyone," one man said. *"But we can demonstrate the value clearly."*

Jonathan nodded. *"We will host a trade demonstration tomorrow. Show how coins can be exchanged for labor, goods, and services. Let them see the benefit directly, not just hear it from me."*

A young woman added, *"And what if someone cheats?"*

Jonathan's eyes hardened. *"Then the community records it. Witnesses note the breach. Trust once broken is difficult to restore, but the system survives. This is not a system of fear—it is a system of honor."*

As evening fell, Jonathan walked through the settlement, observing cabins, traders, and workers. He noticed a small crowd gathered near the coin ledger, examining signatures and trade records.

"Jonathan," one man called, *"there is a dispute over who laid certain stones for the new cabins."*

Jonathan sighed but smiled. *"Then we record carefully, verify with witnesses, and honor the work as it is done. Justice in labor is as important as justice in trade."*

A young boy tugged at Jonathan's sleeve. *"Sir, will the coins really work?"*

Jonathan knelt to the boy's level. *"Yes. One coin at a time, one signature at a time, one stone at a time. The settlement will remember who we are and what we built. That is the true value of these coins."*

As night covered the desert, the settlers gathered around small fires, trading stories, labor reports, and coins. Some were convinced, some skeptical, but all were participating. Jonathan stood among them, quietly observing, knowing that the real test of his system was only beginning.

Terminal Heat: A Dialogue of Exile

by Jonathan Olvera

Jonathan sat with his grandfather in the stillness of the desert evening, the air thick with what he called *terminal heat*. The old man's hands moved over a box of seeds, counting, taking inventory, preparing for the planting season. Jonathan watched him closely, listening as he spoke with the gravity of years.

"It was long ago," his grandfather began, "when I had the job to count every small square of the temple. Back then, I had an idea—for the public benefit, to improve the work of our father and expand this empire. I thought it might spare my scouts from seeing the haunting face of failure."

Jonathan's eyes burned with conviction. "I put all my trust in him. I am like him."

His grandfather studied him. "And what else is going to happen? Do you feel challenged? You should think more about going to school."

"I like that as an obstacle," Jonathan replied. "I am a polite young man. I am not a criminal."

"That is good," the old man said firmly. "There is nothing worse than liars and criminals."

Jonathan's voice grew sharp. "I know what is worse than a liar and a criminal. An intruder. Fat, ugly intruders."

The old man frowned. "Watch your tongue. Behave more. Praise God. If someone told me today to put my boots on and take one step forward in faith, I would do it."

Jonathan shook his head. "The aquarium isn't everything, Grandpa. There is more to life than mining. It doesn't bother me that you talk about it, but it bothers some people."

His grandfather's eyes narrowed. "Would it bother you if someone came here looking for you? Because that is what happened."

Jonathan smiled faintly, answering with defiance. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The old man leaned forward. "You must pay attention. I will tell you how things are done. The danger is real. People come from many places and they ask terrible questions."

"I do not fear this," Jonathan answered. "I only ponder what young people should think about. Meanwhile, we make merry. Have plenty—or at least have some."

"There is no other way," his grandfather muttered.

"I am here," Jonathan said. "And this is terminal heat. Terminal heat."

The old man seemed lost in thought, slipping into one of his episodes. He spoke of intruders, of conflicts with foreign men, his voice wavering between reason and memory. Jonathan steadied him: "Why don't you go to church, Grandpa? Read the scriptures. I believe in it. There is a promise."

"It doesn't exist!" the old man shouted.

"Father," Jonathan said gently, "do not use your family. There could be benefits in going to church."

The old man sighed, his voice softer now. "Sometimes I worry. Not too much. Do you know anything about it?"

"No," Jonathan admitted.

"Then come with me," his grandfather said. And they prayed together, their voices mingling in praise: *Amen. Hallelujah.*

Jonathan echoed, "Praise Him. It is all good work."

The conversation shifted as the old man bent back over his seed collection. "I've been keeping lists. Food must be planted, and planted well."

Jonathan watched him scribble in his notebook. "The sun seems to speak," he said. "Is it hypnotism?"

"Sometimes I don't have the answer," his grandfather admitted.

Jonathan thought of the church, the temple, the leaders he had seen. "There is a man there I trust. Determined, steady. When he asks, I answer: yes, sir."

"That's fine," the old man replied. "I've had my fair share of battles."

"But you've been through it, Grandpa," Jonathan pressed. "I hope everyone will be."

The old man smiled slyly. "Then let us look for a natural remedy."

Jonathan laughed. "I hate to admit it, but I do that too. It's called hot chocolate."

"Drink hot chocolate, then," his grandfather said, amused.

"I'm glad you do," Jonathan teased. "We could be here a very long time."

They shared a quiet *praise* and *amen*.

The old man turned back to his work. "I know the men to ask. Their produce is always good—even if it's a death sentence."

Jonathan lowered his head. "I have many foolish ideas. Time enough to listen."

"Would you like to hear of men condemned?" his grandfather asked.

"Everything is measured," Jonathan replied carefully.

The old man's voice darkened again, sliding into another episode. "The man who sends you to say these things—does he oppose us? What would he think of your place here? You think it unimportant, but it is."

Jonathan stood tall. "This is nothing less than the word incarnate of our leader. Things that have come to pass."

"It has been accepted," his grandfather admitted.

Jonathan whispered, "Sometimes we should all be considered machines."

"That will do," the old man said. "Jonathan, you are gifted and talented."

"Oh, spare me," Jonathan muttered, before lifting his gaze. "The word has come to me. A joyous proclamation."

His grandfather asked, "The new word?"

Jonathan answered only with a question: "Are you aware of the news?"

The old man shook his head. "To touch things unspoken, to explore the wild, to pick up what is forbidden—that is irresponsible."

Jonathan interrupted: "I give thanks for the hands at work, for those who feed on stones. It is just as important as remembering the people who were here before us—our ancestors, our parish folk."

"You could, and I would hold you accountable," the old man warned.

At that moment, they were interrupted by a child no older than nine. The boy's clothes were dirty, his eyes wide with exhaustion.

"Hi," he said softly. "How are you? I'm new here. I'm looking for work. Mother and I had to leave our home. It was always wet, and she didn't want us to get sick. I eat almost everything. I like to paint. I try to make myself useful. Do you think I'll fit in?"

Jonathan and his grandfather exchanged glances, then both answered: "Yes."

The boy smiled faintly. "I have to wash my clothes. We traveled so far, and all I have is dirty now. But I'm honest. I can look good if you need me to. Do you know anywhere I could help?"

The silence stretched. The desert wind moved through the seeds, through the stones, through their weary lives. Jonathan looked at his grandfather, then at the boy, and thought: *This, too, is how nations are built.*

The Bus Stop Dimension

by Jonathan Olvera

The sun gleamed off the steel towers in front of me, their faces covered in glass and mirrors, as though the buildings were posing for a photograph of themselves. I was too tired to care. The bus hadn't come for an hour, and I had given up timing my yawns. So, naturally, I stretched across the bench at the bus stop, laid my head on my backpack, and closed my eyes. Just for a moment.

When I woke up, I knew instantly that something was wrong. The concrete felt softer, almost like it was breathing beneath me. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and looked around. The world hadn't changed much—same streets, same towers—but something about the details was wrong. Very wrong.

The buildings inhaled. Their windows fogged, as though they were exhaling little sighs of boredom. The trees along the road waved without wind, twitching like they were scratching themselves. A bird landed nearby, coughed politely, then took off again.

I froze.

The road shifted its blacktop like a snake shedding its skin. It shuffled to the side, groaning as if it had a bad back. Then it stretched, yawned, and blinked its glowing yellow lane lines at me.

"Morning, sleepyhead," it said.

I almost swallowed my tongue.

The cars stopped at the light were chuckling and gossiping. "Nice shine on your bumper today, Carl," said one. Another beeped. "Thanks, got waxed yesterday. Looking fresh, huh?"

I stared. Nobody else seemed to care. Pedestrians strolled by sipping coffee. They didn't blink when a minivan and a motorcycle exchanged jokes about traffic. It was normal to them. I was the only one losing my mind.

Of course, this was the exact moment the police showed up.

Two officers walked over, one chewing gum, the other writing on a clipboard that kept folding and unfolding like an origami bird. They squinted at me.

"Sir," one said, "we've had complaints that you're... uh... talking to the sidewalk."

"I wasn't—well, it was talking to me first!" I blurted.

The officers exchanged glances. Their radios crackled to life on their shoulders. "Don't believe him," one radio squawked. "He's lying."

"Shut up, radio," said the other.

"Make me," the radio said.

The officer sighed and smacked it, which only made the radio laugh harder.

"So," the gum-chewer asked me, "are you saying the city is... communicating with you?"

"Yes!" I cried. "Everything's alive here. The buildings are breathing, the streets have eyes, and that stop sign just winked at me!"

The stop sign winked again.

"Hallucinating," the other officer muttered, scribbling on his clipboard, which flapped angrily and tried to bite his pen.

That's when it hit me. I wasn't in my world anymore. I'd gone to sleep at a bus stop and woken up in another dimension—a place where the city itself was alive.

And it didn't like me.

The buildings leaned closer, their glass faces shimmering like teeth. Doors creaked open without anyone touching them, whispering, "Come inside, just for a minute..."

The traffic lights flickered impatiently. "Hurry up. Leave. Something bad is coming."

I didn't waste time. I bolted across the street. The asphalt lurched under my feet like a trampoline, trying to trip me. Cars honked in protest. "Watch it! Jogging is illegal here!"

I ran anyway, panting, heart hammering, until I reached a parking lot. But even there, I wasn't safe. The airplanes circling above bent their wings like vultures. "What's he doing here? Intruder! Intruder!" they howled in booming voices.

I sprinted harder, zigzagging past lampposts that tried to kick me. The vending machine rattled and shouted, "Buy a soda or else!" I ignored it.

Finally, I tripped over a concrete block that hadn't been there a second ago. The ground yanked it out of nowhere just to trip me. I went down hard.

My head hit the pavement. Everything spun. My mind did a flip.

When I came to, I was back at the bus stop. Normal city. Normal cars. Nobody breathing or talking or stretching. The bench was cold and uncomfortable again.

For a long time I sat there, dizzy, wondering if I'd dreamed it all. Maybe I had. Maybe I'd simply nodded off in the Arizona sun and let my imagination play tricks on me.

But then, across the street, the crosswalk signal blinked. Not the usual stick figure. Just two words in glowing green:

"SEE YOU SOON."

Santa Claus in the Southwest Desert

By Jonathan Olvera

"Ho, ho, ho!" bellowed Santa Claus, his voice rolling like thunder across the quiet desert morning. He was feeling recharged with magic. The sparkle of Christmas energy coursed through him, even though he stood far from his familiar North Pole.

This year, Santa had been sent on a special mission: a journey to the American Southwest. Unlike the icy expanses of home, here the land was painted with warm sands, cacti dressed in spines instead of snow, and mesas rising like stone castles. But Santa, being Santa, had no trouble seeing Christmas everywhere. Even in the desert, he noticed splashes of red and green—the prickly pear fruits glowing ruby under the sun, the desert pines holding their stubborn needles, and the chile ristras strung on porches like festive garlands.

His mission was a practical one. The elves needed fresh cocoa beans, coffee, and lumber for their workshops. The North Pole's supplies were running low, and Santa knew the Southwest was rich in trade and craft. "The nimble hands here can spin the strongest textiles," he mused, stroking his snowy beard. "Perfect for winter coats and blankets. And cocoa—ah, the heart of hot chocolate!—is the fuel of joy itself."

Yet Santa looked a bit out of place. Dressed in his fur-trimmed red suit, he stood under a blazing sun. The desert heat clung to him, and sweat dotted his brow. But still, he marched with pride, the bell at his waist jingling, his boots crunching against sand and gravel.

When he rose each morning of his journey, he greeted the desert townsfolk with the same cheer he always carried:

"Merry, merry! Ho, ho, ho to all! I am Santa Claus, on business from the North Pole!"

Not everyone believed him at first. Some laughed politely, thinking he was simply a man in costume. Others shook their heads, wondering why anyone would wear so many layers in such heat. But Santa, undeterred, went about his errands, gathering what he needed and spreading joy where he walked.

One day, I saw him myself.

I was sitting outside a little shop in a small town, resting in the shade, when he came into view. His red suit was impossible to miss, blazing like a cardinal against

the pale desert backdrop. I stood and asked, half in jest, "Sir, where do you come from? Why do you dress so warmly? And why do you wear so many colors?"

He stopped, turned, and grinned at me, his eyes twinkling like frost under the desert sun.

"My name," he said with a deep bow, "is Santa Claus, and I come from the North Pole."

"Oh!" I laughed, thinking he played a part in some Christmas play. "That means you are a visitor here. Tell me, what do you do in the North Pole?"

Santa straightened proudly. "I make long seasons of joy. I raise reindeer, I build toys, and I prepare for the great night when I deliver gifts to all good children on Earth."

I blinked, startled. Could it be? I whispered, "I've heard of you, sir—the man they call Santa Claus. But is it true? Do you really spread gifts to the whole world in one night?"

He chuckled, a sound so hearty and warm it filled the air around us. "Ho, ho, ho! Young man, it tickles me that you know of my errand. Yes, in one night I ride across the skies. And though it seems impossible, the magic of Christmas makes all things possible."

The desert felt different in that moment—like a veil had lifted and the ordinary world was touched by wonder.

I replied, "Could that be you, the true Santa Claus, standing here in the Southwest? It has been a long time since we've had a good winter here. To see you—it's like a dream."

Santa reached into his pocket. From it, he pulled a small pouch. Opening it, he pinched some glittering dust between his fingers. Then he leaned close, smiled kindly, and sprinkled the dust upon my head. The grains sparkled like tiny stars, clinging to my hair and shoulders.

"I sprinkle you," Santa declared, "with the blessing of Christmas magic. You, curious soul, will carry the joy of this encounter. I name you a friend of Santa Claus—a companion of my errand. For though I gather cocoa beans, coffee, and lumber, the greatest gift I bring is faith. Faith that love and joy are never far, no matter the land or season."

The air shimmered. I giggled and laughed without meaning to, my heart light as the sparkling dust. For a moment, I was a child again, free of doubt.

Santa winked, tipped his hat, and added, "I will return another time. On Christmas, I shall put your name on my list, and you will find a gift waiting at your home."

He turned and walked away across the desert street. His boots rang like bells, and though he carried no sled, it seemed the air shimmered with the faint sound of reindeer hooves.

I stood in silence, stunned. Had I truly met him? Was it possible that the Santa Claus, St. Nicholas himself, had walked these dusty streets of the Southwest?

Yet the sparkles in my hair did not fade. And the warmth in my heart stayed.

From that day forward, I have never doubted again. Santa Claus is real. He does exist at the top of the Earth, in his snowy kingdom. And once, in the desert, I met him.

I have faith now that gifts will always be prepared for every good soul on planet Earth, and that in one magical night, Santa Claus can and will deliver them.

And sometimes, when the desert winds blow cold in winter, I swear I can hear him far above, calling out into the night:

“Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

Dragon-Sitting for Dummies

By Jonathan Olvera

I was sprawled on the couch, buried under my trusty red blanket — the kind of fabric that manages to trap just the right amount of warmth while making you look like an undercooked burrito. The TV was running on autopilot, flashing through a parade of commercials that all promised life-changing happiness if I only bought a slightly shinier toaster.

That was the moment the nap took me.

One minute I was half-watching a game show rerun; the next, my brain spiraled into that strange dream-world where nothing has rules, and yet everything makes sense.

When I opened my eyes again, I wasn't in my living room. I was standing barefoot on cold stone. The air carried the bite of alpine wind, and far above, a fortress clung to a mountain like it had been built just to dare gravity to do its worst. Smoke curled down from its walls, sliding along the cliffs until it pooled in a rocky basin below.

And then came the wings.

A dragon — an actual dragon — burst from the castle walls, scales flashing red like molten armor. His wings snapped open with a sound like someone shaking out a tarp the size of a football field. He landed before me, eyes glowing like barbecue coals.

And then he spoke. In English.

"Excuse me," he rumbled, his voice accompanied by tiny sparks and curls of smoke. "Would you mind babysitting my kid for the weekend?"

I blinked. "Sorry, what?"

The dragon nodded gravely, as though asking a total stranger to watch his fire-breathing offspring was the most normal thing in the world. Behind him, a mound of dirt shifted. Two little horns poked out, followed by a snout, followed by the rest of a red-scaled baby dragon. The little guy shook off grass, blinked his glowing yellow eyes at me, and said cheerfully:

"Hi."

I looked from the hatchling to the parent. "You want me to... babysit *that*?"

"You'll be rewarded," the dragon promised, in the same tone parents use when bribing babysitters with pizza money. And with that, he spread his wings, muttered something about "dragon yoga retreat," and launched himself into the clouds.

I was alone with the baby.

"Okay, buddy," I said, squatting down to his level. "What do you like to do? Tag? Fetch? Watching Netflix?"

The dragonlet snorted, releasing a puff of smoke that singed my eyebrows. Then he pointed his claws at the rocky basin. "Rocks. Need more rocks."

That was apparently the start of our weekend project.

The kid led me to a nest-like hollow filled with stones. He bounced on his little talons, flapped his stubby wings, and looked expectantly at me. "More!"

So there I was — hiking around the mountainside, hauling rocks of every shape and size like some unpaid intern in Mythical Creature Daycare. Every time I dragged a boulder back, the dragonling would examine it critically, nod, and then blast it with fire. The air filled with the sound of crackling flame, the smell of toasted granite, and my muttered complaints about needing a chiropractor.

The results, though, were... shocking.

After each fiery breath, the stones shimmered, cracked, and melted. Out of the mess came streaks of gold, flecks of silver, and, occasionally, a crystal so bright it made me squint. The kid was basically finger-painting with lava — except instead of messes, he was churning out raw wealth.

"Good stone," he would chirp after a particularly fiery blast, holding up what looked like a freshly minted diamond the size of a jawbreaker. He casually tossed it aside like it was a gum wrapper.

By Saturday night, we had a glittering pile of treasure in the nest. The dragonling was happy, exhausted, and, after one particularly big fire-breath, had accidentally melted the soles of my shoes.

"Buddy," I said, wiggling my toes through the smoldering remains, "this is coming out of your allowance."

Sunday morning, I awoke by the little fire we'd built together, my face smudged with soot, my pockets jingling with stray jewels the baby had tossed at me. Overhead, a shadow grew large against the rising sun.

Mom was back.

She landed with a gust of wind that knocked me flat on my back. The ground trembled under her claws as she peered at the nest. The pile of gold, silver, and diamonds sparkled in the dawn.

"Impressive," she said, her voice softening with maternal pride. Then she turned to me. "You've done well."

"Thanks," I muttered, brushing ash off my blanket-turned-cloak. "Though I'm going to need a tetanus shot and some new sneakers."

She huffed, and a ruby the size of a baseball rolled to my feet. Payment. Not bad for a weekend gig.

The baby waved a claw. "Bye! Come again!"

And just like that, the world flickered.

I blinked and found myself back on my couch, the TV still droning on about life-changing toasters. My blanket was still wrapped around me, but now... heavier. I reached into the folds and pulled out a glittering stone.

I laughed out loud. "Well, guess babysitting rates just went up."

Afterword
by Jonathan Olvera

To the reader who has followed this third collection from beginning to end, I extend my deepest gratitude. Each story here was a fragment — a dream, a question, a half-remembered spark — now stitched together into a whole by your patience and imagination.

This volume is not meant to be a conclusion but a continuation, another entry in the ongoing experiment of storytelling. As with the desert winds of Arizona, some tales arrive suddenly, carrying dust and brilliance, while others settle quietly, asking to be uncovered in time.

If these stories have stirred laughter, reflection, or even a moment of wonder, then they have fulfilled their task. May you carry them forward into your own life, reshaping them in memory, retelling them in your voice, and finding in them what I myself could not name.

Until the next collection — may your days be lit with small mysteries, and your nights filled with stories yet unwritten.

With gratitude,
Jonathan Olvera
Phoenix, Arizona
2025

About the Author:

Jonathan Olvera is a passionate writer and storyteller based in Phoenix, Arizona. With a background in Literature and Journalism, he has long been captivated by the power of words to bridge cultures, spark connections, and illuminate the human experience.

Jonathan's writing often explores themes of national identity, resilience, and love, reflecting his thoughtful engagement with history, society, and the complexities of the human spirit. His stories aim to capture the subtle beauty of everyday life while also delving into larger questions about belonging, leadership, and transformation.

When he's not writing, Jonathan finds inspiration in the world around him—whether by hiking Arizona's desert trails, painting vivid landscapes, or volunteering in his community. These experiences deepen his storytelling, allowing him to weave authenticity, empathy, and a sense of adventure into his narratives.

Driven by the belief that every story holds the potential to change perspectives, Jonathan Olvera is dedicated to crafting tales that resonate with readers and invite them to see the world through new eyes.